

## CHEERING FOR THE OTHER TEAM

Colossians 3:16

In the 2011 movie *Limitless* Bradley Cooper played a down and out writer named Eddie Morra who is given a pill that a friend says might help him. The drug is an experimental one called NZT-48 and it turns out to be the pill all of us have longed for at one time or another. When we were in school and were facing that huge test that we didn't feel prepared for, we wished we could take a pill that would enable us to just know and recall all the material. In the movie this pill did that and more. Suddenly Morra's mind expanded so he could learn anything almost instantly, he could recall everything and his creative ability exploded. He was able to write the book that he had been struggling with and it was incredibly good. He finds himself able to do almost anything. He became, as the movie title says, limitless.

Wouldn't it be great if such a pill existed? As long as the character in the movie had the drug in his system he was practically limitless. As far as I know there is no such physical drug, but there is a spiritual resource that can have that kind of effect on us. No, it won't make us brilliant and creative, but it will make us spiritually limitless. And there's a really cool aspect of this spiritual pill. Have you noticed that it seems like now there are as many commercials for pharmaceutical drugs on television as there are car and beer commercials? Only the drug commercials have some unusual characteristics. They seem to almost always be absurdly hokey and unimaginative, they often range from awkward to downright embarrassing in their content, and their warnings are appalling. People who eat actual food and breathe oxygen should not take this drug. Possible side effects are headache, dizziness, rash, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, your arms fall off, your liver explodes and the entire earth is overrun by locusts. Yeah, that sounds good. I want to take that pill. The good news is this spiritual pill I am recommending may have the side effect of making you different from other people, but that's all, and its positive effects are phenomenal. This pill is the message of Christ. A few weeks ago we learned from Colossians 3:16-17 about how to let the message of Christ live in us. Today I want us to return to Colossians 3:16 and think what that message is and what it looks like when it lives in us.

## GOD IS REAL AND IS WORTHY OF TRUST

The hardest thing about living by faith is it requires faith. Faith means believing in a God whom we cannot detect with any of our physical senses. That's frustrating because everything we know we have learned through our senses. How are we to know there really is a God whom we cannot see, hear or touch?

It is reasonable to conclude that there is a Creator. We live in a cause and effect world. When something happens we seek the cause. I woke up early in the morning and realized I was awake because I had heard a noise. Something in our bedroom made a loud pop. What do you suppose was my immediate reaction? What caused that? Things don't just go pop for no

reason. We know when we encounter an effect, something caused it. It has happened several times now, and I don't know what the cause of the pop is. But I know there is a cause. When you look at the marvelous precision of the universe and of our world, when you look at the mind boggling and intricate systems of the human body, you are seeing effects. It is natural to look for the cause. Our culture offers to us a problematic answer to the question of cause. Its answer is that the cause is a totally naturalistic process involving no action from any outside source. But to me that proposed process has some very serious problems that make it hard to swallow. Not the least of the problems is that the system illogically would have had to cause itself. It becomes both the cause and the effect.

Against that idea is the fact that we see evidence of design in so very much of what exists. Design implies a designer. So it does not require much faith to posit a Designer, a Creator. Most people have a sense that a Maker exists. Listen to the report of musician Michael Card that he shared in an interview after spending time in China. "Again and again in China I talked to people who had never heard of Christianity, never heard of Jesus, never heard a single word from the Bible. Yet through nature and their...conscience, many believed in God. Not only did they believe God existed, they had derived some understanding about his loving character because he provided food, water and a beautiful world. One old woman told me, 'I've known him for years. I just didn't know his name.'"

So it is reasonable to infer a Creator, but unfortunately we know nothing about him. We don't have proof of his existence and our inference leaves us with problems. If God exists why would he not reveal himself clearly? Why would he not let us see him or hear him? Is he hiding from us, and if so why would he do such a thing? Why would he make us physical creatures dependent on our physical senses for knowledge, then not make himself available to our senses? Could there be a number of these powerful beings who have the ability to design and build awesome systems like our universe? Does this Designer care at all about what he has made or was it just some project he finished and then moved on to other things? Is he good or is he mean spirited? Is he personal at all or just some force?

These are questions of enormous importance. When we take the trouble to design and create something it is always for a purpose. This suggests that the designer had a reason, a purpose in making all we see. To fail to comprehend that purpose would be a profound mistake. Imagine that you are a tennis racquet, but you believe your purpose is to serve as an antenna for a radio telescope. How is that going to work out? Your existence will be futile and full of failure. There will always be something wrong and you'll know it. If there is a design, there is a designer. If there is a designer there is a purpose. If there is a purpose task number one for us is to understand the purpose of our existence.

This is why the message of Christ is so enormously significant. Envision yourself as an ancient Colossian. You've heard about gods of all sorts since you were little, but do gods

really exist? If not how did we get here, and if so what are they like? Those questions have been answered by the message of Jesus Christ. God, the Designer and Creator, has revealed himself to the physical senses of human beings. God showed up. The message of Christ is that God is real, he is there and he is good. The message of Jesus is a thundering, world-altering, life-changing one that proves God exists, he is personal, he is interested in life on this planet, and he cares enough about us to go to the extreme of entering human history to communicate to us. In fact the message is he cares about us more than we can possibly imagine.

John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. It starts with God so loved the world. That is the message of Christ. God is real and he loves. He loves us. He loves us individually. He cares about you and me to a degree that we cannot even begin to comprehend. In Matthew 10:29 Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.” Do you pay attention to the birds around your house? Do you know each one of them individually? Of course, there’s one out there that I’ve named Bill (get it, because he has a bill). Do you know all the events in their little lives? I appreciate them, but I don’t know them. I can’t tell them all apart. I can tell a sparrow from a mourning dove and a raven from a hawk and so on, but I can’t identify individual sparrows, or doves, or finches, or towhees. I certainly don’t know when one of them dies unless we find their corpse in our yard. But our heavenly Father knows every single one of those birds. He knows and cares about what happens in their little bird lives. After telling us that amazing truth, Jesus went on to say in verse 30 “even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” In other words, God knows you and cares about you more than he even cares about those birds. If you had some hair fall out in the shower this morning, God knew about it. He knew which numbers bit the dust today. Jesus claimed God knows and cares about the details of our lives right down to how many hairs we have on our heads.

John 2 relates the remarkable story of Jesus’ first miracle. What would you do if you were Jesus and were about to launch the public ministry that would change the world? You’d probably want to start with a bang to get some momentum. Something miraculous would catch people’s attention and cause them to listen to your message. What kind of miracle would you do that would cause people to sit up and take notice? I find Jesus’ choice remarkable because it didn’t involve healing the terrible disease of some pitiable victim, it wasn’t about defeating death, it was done to save some people embarrassment! Jesus was at a wedding of some acquaintances and when they ran out of wine he was asked to help. And he turned water, which they had lots of, into wine. He did it to keep the families from being embarrassed over the fact that they were not adequate hosts. Who were the people getting married? They must have been awfully important people to warrant such a dramatic act of God, right? We don’t know who they were. They were friends of Jesus, and that’s what mattered. The miracle shows that he cared about them even though they weren’t notable or influential people. They were just unnamed, common folk. Yes, the miracle was astounding.

It demonstrated power even over the nature of matter, but the part that really stuns me is that it showed how deeply Jesus cared about people. He even cared about the details of their lives, like having a good wedding. If he hadn't provided the wine no one's life would have been ruined. God's plan for the human race would not have altered even a millimeter. It wasn't that big a deal. But he cared. Jesus sent a message with his very first miracle that he cares about individual people, and not just about what we might think of as the major events of life but also about the sometimes unimportant or even trivial events of our lives.

What then does it mean to let the message of Christ dwell richly in us? In part it means to let the message that God is real, that he loves us and that he cares so deeply about us that even the minute events of our lives matter to him. Being married to Laurie has been such positive continuing theological training for me. She prays about everything. Her first reaction to most situations is to pray. She prays about important things, like people finding the Lord, having their marriages healed, or when they face difficult physical circumstances. But she also prays about things like finding a place to stay when we're on vacation or a place to park the car in a crowded parking lot.

It would be easy to think these things are too trivial for God to pay any attention to. But he knows the number of each individual hair on my head. Now these days that's not so hard because there aren't many left, but he knew every number when I was 25 and had a lot more. He knows me, even though I am merely one insignificant person out of 7 billion currently on the planet. Do you know how much 7 billion is? If you decided to walk around the equator of the earth do you know how far you would get if you took 7 billion steps? They would take you all the way around the earth 106 times! Or think of it this way. Assume the average human is 5 feet tall, factoring in children's height. Then start stacking humans on top of each other, each human standing on the head of the one below. How high would a stack of 7 billion of them reach? Would it reach the moon? Well, yes. Actually 7 billion humans would make 27 stacks as high as the moon. And I'm just one of them. How and why should God care about *anything* in my life? Compared to 7 billion nothing in my life matters very much. It doesn't matter to the 7 billion, so why should it matter to God? Yet it does. That's what God says.

Letting the message of Christ dwell richly in us means living as though this is actually true. It means believing that God knows and cares about everything in my life. It is important to him! Which means I can trust him with it. That's why Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6 that we should be anxious for nothing. Letting this aspect of the message of Christ live in us means being at peace as we trust God and pray about everything in life, and then relax in the peace that goes beyond human comprehension. Letting the message of Christ resound in our lives is believing that God has a purpose for us, that he wants us to bring him glory and thus believing and caring about God's purpose being accomplished no what may be going on in our lives.

Michael Molinos wrote, “If you, the believer, would have everything succeed, if you would have everything come to pass according to your own will, then you will never know the way of peace. Such a person will also lead a bitter and empty life, always restless and disturbed, never touching the way of peace.” Peace comes from not insisting that everything go according to my plan but instead knowing that God is in every situation and trusting him to work his will in it.

## JESUS LOVES UNWORTHY PEOPLE

The message of Jesus’ whole life is that he cared infinitely about people who were utterly unworthy of him. The overwhelming majority of the human race was ignorant of him and indifferent toward him. Of the few who knew of him most rejected him violently. A small number believed in him, but at the climax of his life, they failed him and ran. And as he was dying to save these miserable, unworthy people, people like us, he said, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.”

Romans 5:8 puts it succinctly. “God demonstrates his own love toward us in this: while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” Jesus didn’t look for worthy people who loved him to come rescue. He didn’t demand we become worthy of him before giving his life for us. He didn’t offer a deal in which he said “clean yourself up and then I’ll love you.” He came and died for people who were in many cases indifferent or antagonistic toward him. This trend is seen throughout his life.

In Luke 7:36 Jesus is invited to dinner at the home of a respected Pharisee. In verses 37-38 we’re told, “A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.” The Pharisee and others were appalled that Jesus would even let a woman like that touch him. They had nothing for her except condemnation and disgust. They would have nothing to do with her. But why was the woman crying? It was because she knew that though her life was out of control and respectable people despised her, though she despised herself, she had found love or acceptance in Jesus. She didn’t find a command to measure up and do better. She found grace and love even though she was utterly unworthy of it.

In Luke 19 Jesus arrived at Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. As he was walking into town he came to a tree and spotted a guy who had climbed the tree so he could see over the crowds because he wanted to see what this Jesus guy looked like. The guy was perhaps the most hated man in that city. He ran an organization of tax collectors, and we all know how everyone feels about the IRS. But this was way worse than the IRS. These guys were little better than a gang of traitors and extortionists that were ripping people off. They had a

lifestyle that completely trampled the Law of Moses. Luke 19:5 says “when Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zaccheus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.’” Look at verse 7. “All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’” Zaccheus knew he was utterly unworthy of Jesus’ acceptance. The entire town knew he was unworthy of anyone’s acceptance. But he was the person Jesus singled out. He was the one he chose to stay with.

I could go on and on with examples but you are already familiar with this aspect of Jesus’ character. I believe this is a surprising quality. We have learned in Colossians that the fullness of deity lived in Jesus. In other words, he was fully God. He had the perfect, totally holy and righteous character of God. The typical human thinking is that someone who is pure and good is going to be repelled by and want nothing to do with people who are degraded and defiled. Imagine that a woman is going out to a formal company party and has gotten dressed in her finest clothes, wearing an expensive designer gown. She comes out of her house to discover some men in front who are working on a broken sewer line. They’ve dug it up to repair it and they are already dirty, sweaty and smelling to high heaven. What is that woman’s reaction? Is it to go over and hug each one of them, hang around with them to watch what they’re doing? Is it to go hug them because she so appreciates what they are doing? No way. She steers as far from them as she can. If she even gets close to them she fears the dirt or the smell might spoil her ensemble.

That’s how we kind of think of God, pure and righteous, keeping his distance from dirty, fallen, degraded people. And we are completely wrong. Jesus drew those people to himself like he was a magnet. He welcomed them with joy. He singled out people like Zaccheus to make sure they knew he loved them and wanted to be their friend. He went over, hugged those sewer workers and got down in the trench with them.

So what does it mean to let the message of Christ live in us? First it means not being stopped by the fact that we feel unworthy. We feel unworthy because we are unworthy. To make matters worse we’ve been getting the message from our earliest days that we aren’t worthy. Do you remember when you first felt that? Was it a condemning parent or teacher, or was it the scorn of peers? Was it from feeling overlooked or rejected? We have all heard the message over and over until it becomes deeply embedded within us. But the message of Christ is that the people who were most drawn to and welcomed by Jesus were the people who felt most unworthy. The nobodies, the powerless people, were the ones drawn to Jesus. Meanwhile the people who were the enemies of Jesus were those who thought themselves worthy. They were the ones who had the notice and influence in this world. Jesus opened his Sermon on the Mount saying, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It is those who see their spiritual poverty who know their need of a Savior. They are the ones who when welcomed by the grace of God, will most rejoice over being included. They are the ones who will flock to Jesus. So living in the message of Christ

means not fearing we will be rejected because we are unworthy, but rather rejoicing that Jesus loves and welcomes unworthy people like us.

In Matthew 11:28 Jesus said, “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.” The message of Christ brings rest to our souls. We’ve been trying so hard to earn, to prove, to measure up, to be good, to be lovable, and now Jesus says, “Rest.” He embraces flawed, broken, weary souls just as they are. If it does not cause you soul to relax, to rest, to rejoice, it is not the message of Christ.

But living in that message doesn’t stop there. Laurie and I were on a walk and met a new neighbor for the first time. We talked to him for a bit. It proved to be an interesting conversation. He lives across the street from one of our more eccentric neighbors. This new guy has only been in the neighborhood a few months, but he and the guy across the street are already at war. In our 10 minute conversation it wasn’t long before he began spewing venom about the guy across the street. He made it very clear that he’s out to get him and is actually beginning a campaign. We walked away thinking that the weirdest thing is this new neighbor is a lot like the guy he so despises. He can’t see that what he hates in his enemy exists abundantly in him. But we saw it. Actually you couldn’t miss it. I was also taken aback at how negative he was about girlfriend’s children. He talked about their horrible attitudes and their foul mouths. I found this unusual because he liberally sprinkled the words he thought inappropriate for those kids. My first reaction, honestly, as we walked away, was pretty negative. The natural human response is to think, “Thank you, Lord, that I’m not like that guy.” Here’s the message of Christ: he died for that guy because he loved him so much. Do you think if the message of Christ lives in us it will have any effect on how we relate to that man?

But what about when people do things that are hard to overlook? You mean like rejecting Jesus, torturing him, then nailing him to a cross to kill him as painfully as possible? Luke 23:34 says Jesus’ response to that was “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Remember the story in John 8? The religious leaders brought a woman who had been caught in adultery to Jesus. Even in our jaded and degraded culture very, very few people excuse adultery. This woman was just plain guilty and she knew it. How did Jesus respond to her? After dispensing her accusers with a brilliant maneuver he asked her, “Woman, does no one condemn you?” She said no one had. His answer was, “Then neither do I. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Do you remember how Peter denied Jesus repeatedly on that fateful night when Jesus was arrested? It was as bad a failure as you could cook up. He totally bailed out on Jesus at the crucial moment. Yet when Jesus confronted him about it in John 21 what did he tell him? Peter, it’s over, now go feed my sheep. He forgave.

In February CBS News carried a story about the Gainesville Tornadoes, a high school basketball team from Gainesville, Texas. Usually they have exactly zero fans cheering them on because their school is a juvenile correctional facility for felony offenders. The other students don't come to games because they are incarcerated and not allowed out. Earlier this year they had a game against Vanguard College Prep in Waco. Two Vanguard players, Hudson Bradley and Ben Martinson, decided it felt wrong to play a team that had no one cheering for it. So they began asking Vanguard fans if some of them would do them a favor and cheer for Gainesville. When the Gainesville players entered the gym they were shocked to find they had their own fan section, complete with signs declaring support and cheerleaders. Half of the crowd had been assigned to cheer for Gainesville. But as the game went on everyone started cheering for them. Hudson Bradley said, "Every time they scored the gym was just lit up with cheering and clapping and everyone was on their feet." The Gainesville team didn't deserve it. They were unworthy. They had committed crimes and those people didn't owe them anything. Yet they cheered for them. It made a difference. One Gainesville player said, "When I'm an old man I'll still be thinking about this."

The message of Jesus is that even though we are undeserving God is cheering for us. And it is that in gratitude and joy because he is so in our corner, we can turn and cheer for the failing other team in our world.

## JESUS LIVES FOR THE KINGDOM

Matthew 4:8-9 tells us that as part of his effort to derail Jesus one of the temptations Satan used was to show Jesus what he could have. "The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. All this I will give you, he said, if you will bow down and worship me." Satan offered Jesus the Faustian deal, sell your soul to him and he will give you all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.

Imagine being offered the splendor of the entire world. Whatever you want you can have. What is it that you think would be all you would ever desire? Is it fame? Is it unlimited applause and notice from everyone? Is it power, to be the one in control at last? Is it to have more money than Bill Gates? Is it to have all the love you could envision? Is it to have pleasure, whether lawful or illicit? Whatever you might think of, all of it was offered to Jesus right there.

Jesus was confronted with perhaps the fundamental temptation of life. The question before him was "what is your life going to be about?" Would he choose to get what any human would want, to serve his own personal desires, or would he deny himself and serve God? Jesus understood what was at stake. To say no to Satan and yes to his Father put him on a road that led straight to the cross. Verse 10 says that Jesus said to Satan, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."



Serve him only. Serve him *only*. Let nothing and no one else elbow him aside in your priorities and commitments. Do not serve anyone or anything, including your own desires, in place of serving the Lord your God. In John 8:29 Jesus said, “The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.” Jesus lived every moment of his life doing what he knew pleased his Father.

In John 4 Jesus initiated a conversation with a woman that was highly unusual because it transcended several racial, religious and social barriers. In it he led a woman of a rival religious and ethnic group, a woman with seriously compromised morals, to believe in him. This happened while Jesus’ disciples were off buying food for lunch. When they came back they offered him some food and he answered in verse 32, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” Their response was along the lines of “You had a stash of food. You know you could have told us before we went to the trouble of buying lunch for you.” But Jesus wasn’t talking about physical food. In verse 34 he said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” Food is what sustains us. It energizes us.

This is more obvious in Laurie than in me, but it is true of all of us. Laurie has a fast metabolism so she gets significantly affected when her blood sugar runs low. If she goes too long without eating or drinking something she starts to get this hollow look on her face. Her normally cheerful and upbeat attitude flags and she begins to get quiet and even borders on grumpy. Please note I said she borders on it, not becomes it. When she eats it is like giving water to a wilted plant that immediately begins to perk up. The usual Laurie returns to life. She needs that food to sustain her but also to give her energy.

Jesus said the thing that sustained him, that gave him energy, was doing the work of the Father. This is what gave him life. Yes, of course, he had to eat food, but if you asked him he could last longer without food than he could without doing the work of the Father. He proved that at the beginning of his public ministry when he spent 6 weeks out in the wilderness without food. He survived because he was doing the will of his Father. In other words, this goes back to purpose. Jesus understood the Father had a purpose for him, and his food was to always fulfill the Father’s purpose.

Jesus’ whole life was a loud statement that knowing and serving his Father was far more important than any personal pursuit or desire. The message of Jesus is that serving God, living for his kingdom, is what will sustain us and energize us in the long run. In Matthew 16 Jesus said that a person who seeks to “save his life,” meaning to take care of himself and live for selfish goals and desires, only loses his life. It ends up sapping us of life, not sustaining and energizing us. It is only as we live for God’s kingdom in everything we do that we find life, that we come alive.

For us, then, to let the message of Christ live richly in us means to let pervade in us the message that living for the work of the Father, living for the kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of me, is life giving and is profoundly meaningful. Living for the kingdom of me instead of the kingdom of God is life destroying and empty.

During the last half of my seminary training I was on the staff of a megachurch whose pastor was a man named Chuck Swindoll. You've likely heard of him. He had a hugely successful international radio program and many best-selling books. He is still a dynamic guy today. As I was launching my early ministry a couple of people actually said to me that they thought I was going to have a ministry like his. I didn't drink the Kool Ade even then. But I have a couple of friends I went to school with who went on to have megachurch ministries. I never had that kind of visible worldly success. And now as John Sisti puts it, the runway is getting kind of short up ahead. I'm far nearer the end of my years of service than the beginning. I feel safe in predicting I am not going to have a huge ministry of international scope. If I had bought into the world's system and lived for my kingdom and my success, what do you think I'd be like today? I would be disillusioned, bitter, and probably jealous of others who have earned more notice. Though I am not perfect, I learned long ago not to focus on that, but to let the message of Christ live in me, and that means to care about doing the work of the Father, living for his kingdom, wherever he puts me. So the result of that is that today, even though I'm ancient, even though the world takes no notice of me and "my" ministry, I'm as enthusiastic as ever, if not more so, more thankful than ever that God would use me in any way, and am as eager as ever to continue his work. Serving God's kingdom brings life. Serving the kingdom of me will only produce death.