

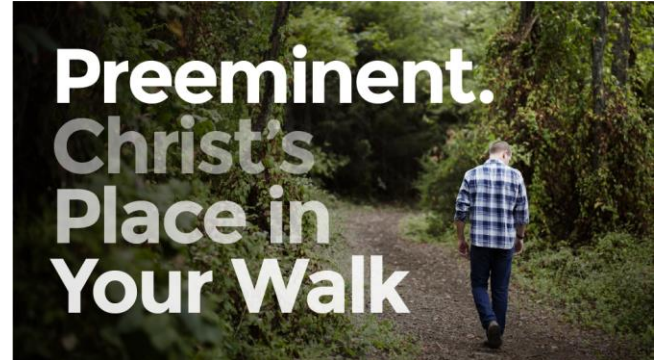


# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

## SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

# Is Christ Preeminent?

**Preeminent. Christ's Place in Your Walk | Part 18**  
**Kevin O'Brien | May 3, 2015 | Colossians 4:7-18**



Seventeen weeks, four chapters and 95 verses have all pointed in one direction: Jesus Christ is preeminent. In our time in Colossians we've seen Christ's preeminence in both the world and in our walk. As we come to the end of this series in Colossians, I ask one simple question: is Christ preeminent? Not in a "Yes, of course He is because that's the right answer and I'm in church" sort of a way, but really in your life, is Christ preeminent?

We believe in the truth of Christ's preeminence, but do we believe that it has a real effect on our lives and the world around us? Look back at Colossians 1:15-20:

*[The Son] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

Soak that in for just a moment. What an amazing passage. Jesus Christ is preeminent. This isn't just a catchphrase or a cliché, but the heart of the message of the Bible. More than being the heart of the message of the Bible, it is the heart of God.

We've struggled through difficult passages on baptism and circumcision in this series. We've been reminded that our faith is not about ceremonies or rules. Paul has exhorted us not to fall into vain philosophies or seductive teachings that sound spiritual, but actually draw us away from Christ. We've been taught to put to death our earthly nature and clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We have received instructions as husbands and wives, children and parents, employers and employees. Colossians is an amazing book.

Now we come to today's passage, Colossians 4:7-18:

*Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.*

*Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."*

*I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.*

We have seen so many amazing things in this book, yet Paul ends with the stuff that we normally skip over. He ends with all of the stuff that sounds like a giant Facebook update or the ending of the phone conversation with your grandmother. “Say hello to your sister. Your Aunt Judy says, ‘Hi.’” Paul spends 12 verses name-dropping and giving lists. What gives, Paul? It makes up almost 13% of the entire book. The passage I read first was six verses—Colossians 1:15-20, which is known as the Christ Hymn. Then there are twelve verses devoted to this ending. Why does Paul end his letter this way?

Hidden among the greetings and the mundane expressions are three truths about living Christ’s preeminence. These are examples of what it means to have Christ as preeminent in the real world.

## 1. Christ is Preeminent when Christianity is Not a Solo Sport

Colossians was not written to a single person, but to the community of faith within Colossae. The end of Colossians reinforces this truth. Paul includes 11 names and references that comprise at least four churches. This is not an accident. It’s not irrelevant to us today. We are not alone. Our Christian life is not a solitary sport. Paul’s closing remarks remind us of that.

### People matter, no matter who they are

In Mark 12:28-31, Jesus is asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” His response is straight from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18: “Love God and love others.” This list that Paul gives covers an interesting combination of people.

First, there’s Tychicus, the messenger who delivers Paul’s letters to the Ephesians, Colossians and to Philemon. He is from Asia Minor in western Turkey, the neighborhood where these letters are being sent. He is mentioned in Acts 20:4, Ephesians 6:21, 2 Timothy 4:12 and Titus 3:2. He is among Paul’s companions in his third missionary journey throughout Macedonia and Greece. He may have even gone all the way to Jerusalem to deliver the collection. This is a well-traveled guy.

Secondly, there’s Onesimus, the run-away slave. He is the lowest of the low, a fugitive from justice. He is the reason why Philemon was written. He was probably a convert during Paul’s ministry in Rome. According to Philemon 10–12, he is very close to Paul, who calls him both “son” and “my very heart.” The runaway slave, the convert, is being treated exactly the same as Tychicus and Epaphras, the ministers with whom Paul works.

Aristarchus is a fellow prisoner of Paul’s from Thessalonica. He was seized during the riot in Ephesus according to Acts 19–20. He was with Paul for at least part of his journey to Rome. He is one of Paul’s three Jewish coworkers.

One of the others is Jesus, called Justus. We don’t know anything else about him other than that he was a comfort to Paul.

Then there’s Mark, the cousin of Barnabas and cause of the split between Paul and Barnabas. He is now restored to Paul. He becomes Peter’s scribe and writes the first Gospel about Jesus. Early Christian tradition suggests that the young man mentioned in Mark 14:51–52 who flees naked from Gethsemane when the soldiers come is probably Mark himself.

There are three people who aren’t Jews:

- Epaphras was an elder of the church in Colossae and went to Rome to ask Paul for advice concerning the conflict in Colossae. He is a prayer warrior. Colossians 4:13 tells us that he is connected to the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well. He was like the first century equivalent of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Methodist circuit rider, going to multiple churches. Perhaps he started them all.
- Luke, the dear friend. Here we learn that Luke is a doctor. He is a traveling companion of Paul and will end up writing almost a quarter of the New Testament (Luke and Acts).
- Then, there’s Demas. He’s mentioned again in Philemon and 2 Timothy 4:10, where we learn that he has loved the world and deserted Paul.

Then there’s Nympha. The church meets in her home. Some of your Bibles may say that Nympha is a “he.” It is a tricky thing because there are two names that appear in different manuscripts that are very similar. Early manuscripts support both. Most scholars believe that “she” is correct. It doesn’t matter a whole lot in the grand scheme of things. I think “she” is appropriate because it would be more likely for a scribe to think, “Well, men are the head of the house and so this is a mistake; I’ll just correct it.” She may be a wealthy widow who serves the church by offering her home as a meeting place.

Finally, there's Archippus who is set aside for a specific work. In Philemon, Paul calls him a fellow soldier. He's probably a minister who is struggling or who at least needs encouragement.

These are real people from all kinds of places, with different jobs and education levels, different statuses and roles, men and women, young and old. We learn from this list that Paul is not doing his work alone. He has companions and fellow workers. All the teaching he does matters because Christianity is a living faith. It is not a collection of abstract principles. Christ is preeminent in these people's lives, not just their minds.

Paul's writings are intensely practical. This might sound odd at first. However, they are practical because Paul is always concerned that these principles are lived out in real life by real people. These people—across ethnic and religious boundaries, gender and socio-economic realities—are Paul's coworkers and friends. They are "dear friends," "fellow prisoners." They are vouched for and they are a comfort to him.

Do you have people like that in your life? You should. Develop friendships in a way that go beyond social media. Virtual intimacy is not the same as lived life. It can do in a pinch; it's better than nothing, but we need one another. Paul's list of eleven people tells us that.

Not only do people matter, but:

### **The church is bigger than you and me**

We might think about the church as a set of ministries, or the four walls and the things that we do inside them. It wasn't like that in the first century. Paul is writing to the church at Colossae which was spread out, small and disorganized. It involved meeting in houses like Nympha's or Philemon's. There was no Christian Industrial Complex. You couldn't turn on Christian Radio or find a Christian book or put a plaque with a verse on your wall. These are churches that are connected organically to one another. They need each other and they know it.

Paul mentions the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis, as well as the church in Nympha's home. He tells the Colossians in 4:16 to read this letter in the church of the Laodiceans and that the letter to Laodicea should be read in Colossae. We don't know what that other letter was. It could have been lost. Many scholars believe it was Ephesians which would make sense in a lot of ways, given the content that it covers and that Tychicus delivered that letter as well.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the church fights amongst herself more than ever before, both within churches and between churches. There are reasons for some of those arguments. We cannot compromise on the truths of Scripture or the life of faith to which God calls us. Sometimes I wonder if we fight because we want control. Sometimes, we're more concerned about the rightness of our position than proclaiming Christ as preeminent.

Christ is the center of the church. The church is bigger than you and me. It will not always look like us or act like us. Village Bible Church has four campuses. Each one of them is different. We may worship differently. Some churches will cross ethnic boundaries that make us uncomfortable. However, that doesn't matter if Christ is truly preeminent. We cannot compromise on truth, but we must make sure that what we argue about is actually truth and not our own preferences.

There is a third way that Christianity is not a solo sport...

### **Everyone has a job to do: leaders and laypeople**

The list Paul gives is not just a mix of ethnicities and genders. There is a mix of leaders and laypeople. Some, like Epaphras and Archippus, seem called to a specific ministry in a specific place. We might call it full-time ministry. I don't like that term. I understand why we use it, but it has bad implications. It tends toward the idea that people who get paid, like pastors and evangelists, are the spiritual ones who are doing ministry. This is ridiculous. We are all supposed to be involved in full-time ministry. We should be constantly ministering to those around us: our families, friends, community, churches, even our enemies. We don't get a pass because we don't get paid to do it.

Every person whom Paul mentions has a job to do. Like them, some of us are messengers. Some are companions. Perhaps you have a space where a ministry or a church can meet. Maybe you can come alongside and encourage. Perhaps your job is to teach or to clean or to fix things. Or maybe you have a burden for some underserved community or need. There are a host of opportunities. Everyone has a job to do. We see this in Paul's list.

Not only is Christianity not a solo sport, it's not a spectator sport. Paul assumes that everyone has a job to do and a role to play. Christianity is not a bunch of statements to agree with: sign on the dotted line, go on your merry way, and live your life the way you want. The Christian faith is for real people living it out in the real world. If we aren't actively living out our faith, then what we are really saying is that Christ is not preeminent. Christ *is* preeminent when Christianity is not a solo sport.

## 2. Christ is Preeminent in all Circumstances

It's not a bad thing for us to want a better life. It's not a bad thing to want happiness or security or a future for our kids. The questions we must ask ourselves are, "Are we willing to follow Christ when our circumstances are less than ideal? Are we willing to claim His Name when bad things happen? Or are we just using Jesus?" Are we saying, "Okay God, I'm going to bargain here. I'll follow and do what you want, do the right things and show up when people need me. I'll be a good citizen. However, You have to keep Your end of the bargain, God. You have to smooth the edges and make my life comfortable." This is sort of what Paul was talking about in Colossians 2:16–23. It's not about the festivals you observe. It's not about the rules. It's not about denying yourself. That's not the essence of our faith.

Having a good life is fine, wanting a good life is fine, but it's not the goal of our lives. Christianity is not a civic religion or a self-help mechanism. If all of this is true, if it is real, then no matter our circumstances, no matter the hurts, the pain, the doubt, the confusion, we can say with Job, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). That is a scary thing to say. It is scarier to live, but that is what we see in this passage today.

I see at least four circumstances:

### Chains

In Colossians 1:24, we read that Paul is suffering. In Colossians 4:18 he says, "*Remember my chains.*" Literally, he is in prison when he is writing this. If we read the book of Acts, we can see all that Paul has gone through. Second Corinthians 11:24–28 gives us a list of hardships that Paul has endured:

*Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.*

Paul knew what it meant to suffer for Jesus. In Colossians 1:24, he rejoices in it. Why? Why endure all of this? Paul believed that Christ was preeminent.

If you caught it in verse eight, this is what he said about Tychicus' job: "*I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts.*" Think about that. Tychicus is being sent from Paul, who is in prison, and his job is to encourage the hearts of the Colossians by telling them what's going on in Paul's life. That's fairly counterintuitive, no matter the circumstances.

I don't know what chains you're facing today. Perhaps they're of your own making. We don't face literal chains like Paul did. There may be a day coming when there will be consequences for proclaiming the Name of Christ. In that day, we will have to ask ourselves, "Am I willing to forgo that job or promotion because I proclaim Christ? Not because of my attitude, not because of my personality, but because of my actual beliefs?" Will you be willing to give if your tax deduction goes away? If Christ is preeminent in our lives, then these things—as inconvenient and frustrating as they may be—will not matter. Not really.

### Controversy

Colossians wasn't written because everything was going well. Epaphras went to see Paul because there was controversy. Heresy had crept into the early church; it wasn't idyllic. In Revelation 3:14–22 we see that the church of Laodicea was ravaged. We don't know exactly what it was, but that really doesn't matter. It could have been no rules, too many rules. That's not the point. The point is that there were troubles and false teachings which were taking the focus off the most important point—Jesus Christ.

Whenever we make our faith more about ourselves than about Jesus, controversy comes. It will tear us apart if we're not careful. Sometimes we need to face controversy. We need to face situations that will refine our faith. We need to learn what it is we truly

believe and what Christ requires of us. It can be a refiner's fire (Malachi 3:2). When we handle controversy well, it can help us see that God loves the person we disagree with, too. They may not be as terrible as we think.

When I left seminary, I left a conservative, dispensationalist school. Then I went to grad school at a very liberal, reformed school. I found out that the liberals I met in real life were people who loved God and were trying to figure out their faith. I was not always convinced that we loved the same God. During this time I realized there are a ton of things that I believe in, but there are only a few hills that I am willing to die on. It's not that I don't believe those other things, but what I've found is that at the heart of it all I must know Who Jesus Christ is and what I am doing with Him. Christianity is about Who He is and what He has done.

### **Neither Slave nor Free**

Paul's list includes the lowest of the low—the runaway slave—and the highest of the high—a wealthy landowner—and every status in between. It doesn't matter how we're seen by those around us, how we're treated or valued. Colossians 3:11 says, "*Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*" If we are harboring ill feelings toward others because of their status, we are sinning against God and one another. We're not following the example of Christ. We're not following Paul, who counted all believers as brothers and sisters in Christ.

We've seen in the past week in our country that old habits and old hatreds die hard. All too often we let status, class, race and culture affect how we view one another, even among fellow believers. This should not stand. When we do this, we show the world that Christ is not really preeminent. If we are looking down on others for whatever reason, whether they are fellow believers or not, we need to repent, because it is sin.

Closely related to this idea of status is:

### **Whether Rich or Poor**

Paul's companions included people who relied on others for everything they had, as well as people who were very well-to-do. Some of us have much and some of us have little. The things we have or the things we don't have should not define who we are. Nor should the things that others have or don't have. The question is not what we have, but what we do with it. In Philippians 4:11–13 Paul says:

*Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

Bottom line: if God has given you a lot, be grateful for it. Use it for His glory, not your own. If God has given you a little, be grateful for it—He is taking care of you. Don't begrudge others, but seek how you might show Him to be preeminent even with the little that you have. The Scriptures are full of stories about people who had nothing and did amazing things. In fact, there are more stories about people who had very little than people who had a lot.

How do we live out this preeminence?

- We must love God and love people.
- Christianity is not a solo sport.
- Our circumstances don't determine Christ's preeminence.
- He is preeminent in every circumstance.

## **3. Christ is Preeminent When We Put on Christ's Character**

Colossians 2:6-7 says, "*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*" Paul's final greeting, this list of coworkers, shows us what it looks like to put on Christ's character. I see several character traits in this passage:

## Faithfulness

Tychicus and Onesimus are called faithful brothers. Epaphras always wrestles in prayer. These are reliable, trustworthy men. They have not given up. This does not mean there are no bumps and bruises. Archippus must be encouraged in order to complete the work that he has been given. Faithfulness doesn't mean that we don't struggle; it means we continue on in the struggle. There is a very real difference.

Sometimes we buy into the idea that we just don't have what it takes. "So-and-so over there has it all together. They can do it. I can't." That isn't what we see here. Mark, after all, has been restored from failure not once, but twice. This is the guy who writes one of the four Gospels. Faithfulness means getting up when we've been knocked down and continuing on with Christ's help.

## Having a Servant's Heart

Look at Paul's list again: travelers, helpers and coworkers for the Kingdom. They aren't motivated by their own personal gain, but by the Kingdom of God. They have seen and known that Christ is indeed preeminent. Like Paul in Colossians 1:25, they serve the church of God for God. The goal, according to Colossians 2:2, is that the church would be encouraged in heart and united in love so that the church may have the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ.

Furthermore, these men have been a comfort to Paul and have encouraged the church in Colossae. A servant's heart is about more than just doing; there's an attitude as well. We have to work with the right heart of love for one another, encouraging and comforting those who need it. The secret is when we look around at one another, all of us need encouragement and help.

## Prayerful

Epaphras wrestles constantly in prayer. He strives or agonizes. The word implies the pain of exertion. His prayer life echoes Paul's own: *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you"* (Colossians 1:3). *"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you"* (Colossians 1:9). It's all too easy to go about our lives as if it is all up to us, never praying except perhaps at meals, our kids' bedtime or when we need things smoothed over.

When was the last time you contended for something in prayer? Do you believe God works through your prayers? Or have you become immune to the idea? Have you bought into this idea that God knows everything, so what's the use? Or maybe you're tempted to think, "God has a plan and He's not going to be thwarted so what's the big deal? Why do I need to pray?" Maybe we just don't believe that God answers prayer at all.

Paul doesn't give us that option, nor does the rest of the Bible. Over and over again, throughout Scripture we see that prayer matters. Most of the Psalms are prayers to God. We don't always understand how or why prayer works. I don't understand the mechanics of prayer. I can't break it down into its various parts and say, "This is how it works," because I don't know. I don't understand the how and the why. I do know that Deuteronomy 4:7 tells us that God comes near to us when we pray to Him.

Pastor James Emery White of Mecklenburg Community Church in North Carolina writes this about prayer: "When we pray, we open up the inner recesses of our life to the stirrings of God. Prayer is not simply a matter of words, but also a relationship. This does not make prayer easier, but more complex." A bit later, White reflects on the Lord's Prayer saying, "His answer suggested, 'Here is the prayer that will mark you.' And it would define them. Authentic prayer is deeply molding and transforming, making its content decisive for the life of the Christian." We don't put on Christ's character if we do not pray.

## Hard Working

The character of Christ is not passive, it's active. We all have jobs to do. Epaphras worked hard for the churches in Colossae and Hierapolis and Laodicea. In Colossians 1:29 Paul is *"...struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."* Jesus was constantly ministering to people. The Christian life is not one of "Sit back, relax and enjoy the ride." It is a life of fulfilling, but difficult work. Ephesians 2:10 says, *"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."* When we don't work, our spiritual muscles atrophy. If I don't teach, if I don't write or help others, I feel my faithfulness getting weaker.

## Stand Firm

What does Epaphras pray? That the Colossians would stand firm in all the will of God. The world around us, even many who would claim the Name of Christ, would have us bow down to the idols in our time. We don't have to bow down before Baal or

Caesar. It's not the statue of Nebuchadnezzar that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced. Ours are more insidious, more devious: respectability, success, power. What are you willing to give up and bow down to in order to get what you want? We might be haunted by our past failures or our own brokenness, but we're not relying on ourselves to stand firm. We're relying on Christ.

## Mature

We don't get to stay in eternal spiritual adolescence. We don't get to live in the spiritual basements of our parents' homes while we play video games. We don't get to live off the residuals that we've done in the past. Mature means that we're not content to stay where we are. We're not content with a little Jesus, but we're rooted and built up in Him. How do we get there?

## Listen

We must listen and learn. The churches were to read the Scriptures aloud and seek out God's truth, exchanging it with one another. We claim to be people of the Bible. We are a Bible church. The way that we understand Who God is and what He is up to is by actually reading it. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that the Word of God is alive and powerful. In Psalm 119:18, David prays, "*Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.*" Our eyes can't be open to this living and powerful truth if we are not willing to read it.

## Exercise Accountability

We can't do this alone. Archippus is exhorted to complete his work. Notice that the text says, "Tell Archippus..." The church must encourage him. We must encourage one another and hold one another accountable so that Christ will be preeminent in our individual lives and in our collective life as the body of Christ. We need one another. We become more like Christ when we spur one another on. We can't do that on our own. We can't have accountability if all we are willing to say to someone else when he or she asks us how we're doing is, "I'm fine." None of us are fine. That's the point. We are all broken and sinful people.

## It's all about grace

At the end of the day, it's all about grace. Paul ends with a simple sentence: "*Grace be with you.*" Just like the rest of this section, we can be tempted to gloss over these words and treat them as a "God bless you" kind of ending. You may read it quickly and turn the page. It might be the most important sentence of these twelve verses. Grace is not just a greeting; it is the heart of the message of this letter. It is found throughout Colossians and here it is at the end.

Paul ends every one of his letters with what is called a "grace wish" for the people to whom he's writing. Grace is at the heart of Paul's message. It's at the heart of Scripture. Grace is not simply something that God bestows on us; grace is something that God is. Grace is the unmerited favor of God poured out on us. Grace is Jesus Christ in Whom the fullness of deity lives in bodily form. When we put on the character of Christ, when we exhibit grace, when we give grace to one another, we display Christ's preeminence. The place of grace in showing Christ's preeminence to the world cannot be understated. It cannot be overstated.

What would happen if we as the people of God actually lived lives of grace to the world around us? If we put aside our selfishness, our rights and our rightness, showing others the grace that God has shown us in Jesus Christ, I think the world would see that Christ is preeminent.

As I close, I want to give you Paul's benediction from Colossians 3:15-17:

*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Amen and amen.