

“The Tools Are Not the Goal”

August 16, 2026

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Matthew 15: 10-20

When it comes to woodworking, I like power tools. For example, I have around a dozen saws including circular saws, table saws, miter saw, radial arm saw, jig saw, bandsaw, reciprocating saws and oscillating saws. And that is just my saws. I have many, many more power tools. I like power tools, and each tool has its specialty. But does having a basement workshop filled with tools make me a woodworker? No. A woodworker is someone who actually works with wood to create something useful and beautiful. Just having the tools does not make you are woodworker. True, woodworkers have and use all these tools. They cannot do their work without them, but just randomly cutting a board every once in a while does not make you a woodworker. Woodworkers use tools to create beautiful and useful things out of wood. If you are not creating things out of wood, you are not a woodworker.

The Old Testament has a simple assumption that shapes many of its most significant laws and traditions: things were either set apart as holy or they were profane. Things in the temple, the temple itself, the sacrifices, were holy. They were sanctified – set apart for God. But other things were not for God, and whatever was not, was profane, unholy, unclean. One of the goals of being the people of God was to be a holy people, which meant they were set apart from the world as much as possible, and kept clean from it. So if you were part of God’s holy people, set apart for God’s service, and you walked through town and touched something that was not ritually cleansed or set apart for God, your hands were exposed to the unholy. And in order to keep that unholy from entering you, you had to wash your hands before eating so the unholiness didn’t transfer to your food and thereby enter you. This had nothing to do with hygiene, it had to do with holiness. Many of the Jewish laws followed this logic. The world was not godly, not holy (something we totally understand and agree with), and as a people set apart for God, they needed to stay away from anything of the world that was not dedicated to God, or it would defile them and make them more worldly and less Godly.

Ritual washing was a tool to keep the separation. Jewish dietary laws are tools to keep one separated and holy. Sabbath laws and traditions are tools to define what is rest and thereby keep the Sabbath holy. And just like in woodworking, tools are good things. They help us do what we want to do. The problem comes when the tools become the focus instead of God or even the holiness you are trying to preserve. That is what happened in this morning’s Scripture. Some of the Jewish leadership noticed that Jesus’s disciples ate without performing the ritual hand washing, violating the purification laws. They confronted Jesus with this, and Jesus responded, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out

of the mouth that defiles... Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer?"

Jesus was trying to refocus their efforts from defining a woodworker by their tools, to defining a woodworker by what is created. Following specific rituals doesn't make you holy anymore than owning a dozen saws makes you a woodworker. All the tools the Jewish law had to offering were to set you apart as God's, to allow you to come into God's presence. And the disciples were already literally walking with God as they serving with Jesus. They were where the tools hoped to bring them, but the scribes and Pharisees were too focused on the tools to see what was right in front of them.

It would be fun to stand here and point at those silly scribes and Pharisees and all the places they focused too much on the tools and missed the point of why we use them, but eventually we would have to recognize the 3 fingers that are pointing back at us. As Christians we have a habit of doing the same. "Don't drink, smoke or chew, or hang around with those who do." In some circles, that became the definition of what it meant to be a Christian. Don't get me wrong. Those are good tools. Personally, I use those tools as a way of setting myself apart for God. But they are tools. They are not the definition of a Christian. We have had some other identifying rules that did not age well, like when the church came out against dancing (which we have just witnessed can be a way of worshipping God), against playing cards, against going to the movies, against women wearing pants, and one of my personal favorites, against beats 2 and 4. Rock and roll came along and emphasized beats 2 and 4 and some parts of the church started referring to them as the devil's beats. Again, don't get me wrong, these were and are good tools used to keep Christians from wandering away from the holy from getting lost in the world that is not Holy, away from pleasing to God, and away from eternal life. But a Christian is someone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, who has taken Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, and invites Jesus to come into their life and take control. The tools are helpful, but are not the definition.

Another form of the same temptation. This morning we sang "The Heart of Worship" by Matt Redman. In the late 1990s, Matt's home church in England was at the forefront of modern worship, known for its innovative services, multimedia experiences, and rockin' worship band. They were growing rapidly and attracting worldwide attention, but the leadership gained a sense that the congregation had become more like "consumers" of music rather than active participants in worship. The tool had become the definition. The lead pastor took the bold step of removing the sound system, band, and all the instruments from worship for a season. The experience reminded them that worship is ultimately about Jesus who demands an authentic response from the depths of the soul. Redman wrote "The Heart of Worship" in response to that season, singing:

I'll bring You more than a song
For a song in itself
Is not what You have required
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear
You're looking into my heart
I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it
When it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus

Worship is one of the tools we use to connect with God through Jesus Christ, but rumor has it there are woodworkers out there who do not use power tools. They do all their work by hand with hand saws and chisels and block planes and knives. And they make some incredibly beautiful and functional pieces. I get to be at praise team practice and hear how those three women use music to worship God – to lift their offering to God. And then I go to a committee meeting and hear how some miss passing the offering plate up and down the aisles because giving their financial gift was their most intimate worship moment – lifted their offering to God. Another tells me the times of silence are their favorite moments of true worship because it is the only time they pray all week. And it is so funny because others don't like those parts of worship and wish we would skip them. For some of us, learning something new about God and ourselves is when they draw closer to God. Still others lift their offering when they are serving another, or fighting for another's rights, or cooking food to share, or visiting and bringing comfort in challenging times. And I celebrate every one of those awesome tools we have to help us lift our offerings to God, but at the same time, remembering they are just tools. They are not the goal. They are the tools that allow us to create the beautiful and functional relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And that, my friends, is the goal.

In the 10th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul is dealing with an intense conflict within the church. In the time, animal sacrifice was common in many different religions, and after the ceremony, the leftover meat from the sacrifice was brought to town and sold, usually at a discount price. Well, some of the church leaders were seen buying this discounted meat at the market, taking it home and eating it. This was not good because it was believed that the deity the sacrifice was offered to, entered the meat when it was sacrificed, and by eating that meat, you were participating in the worship of that rival god, inviting them into you. Therefore, Christians should not buy and eat that meat. Others in the church simply proclaimed there is only one God. All those other so-called gods are just figments of their worshippers' imaginations. They do not really exist, and therefore there is nothing to enter the meat during the sacrifice. The meat is not tainted and there is no reason it should not be eaten. Paul responds by saying if you are refraining from buying and eating that meat because you believe it dishonors God, keep up

the good work. You are giving God glory by refraining. If you recognize there is only one God and therefore eat the meat, knowing it is clean, keep up the good work. You are giving God glory as you eat it. Paul says don't be arrogant and throw your differences in each other's faces, but use the tools God has given you. For some women, always wearing a dress and never cutting their hair are tools they use to connect with God. For others, wearing pants and short hair celebrates a freedom they found in Jesus. Can we celebrate them both? The person who comes to worship dressed up in their "Sunday best" as a way of bringing their best to God, can sit next to someone wearing shorts and flip-flops who is ecstatic to know that Jesus comes to meet them as they are. Can we recognize both as using tools that help them claim the God they know and love? Can they both be right without the other having to be wrong? I know God is excited to see them both in worship.

Once you move beyond stacking blocks on top of one another, you need to use tools to be a woodworker. And you need to use tools to be a Christian. A couple years ago we did a study called "The Walk" and highlighted worship, study, serving, giving, and bearing witness to our faith as essential tools of the Christian life. There are different ways to do each of those, but they need to be done. Pretending to glorify God and draw closer to God by skipping any of those is just self-worship in disguise. We need to practice them. Verse 19 reminds us our hearts are already full of "evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander," and we need to constantly stay connected to God to keep those things from coming out and defiling us. Use your tools. Use the tools that bring you closer to God. Use them to make something beautiful and functional with God. But the heart of worship and reason for all the tools is still Jesus. Don't let an unnecessary tool get in the way.

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