

WORD-ROOTED PRAYER AND WORSHIP - Keeping Your Heart Close To The Flame - Part 17

Sunday, October 30th, 2022, 10 a.m.

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PURITY OF WORSHIP AND THE UNITY OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

Matthew 5:21-26 - “You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' [22] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. [23] So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, [24] leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. [25] Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. [26] Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

This passage from the teaching of Jesus opens up a slightly different emphasis on the whole subject of worship. We've been studying the *theology* of worship - *why* worship is important, and *what* worship entails. Then we took two weeks studying the *practical importance* of worship. As we saw last week, worship is intertwined with *strength for the battles of life*.

In today's text we learn not only that worship is *valuable* - it is *fragile*. It can be *hindered - plugged up* - in the believer's life - neutered of spiritual dynamic and power. So indirectly, this passage gives Jesus' evaluation of the importance of worship. He cautions that we must let absolutely nothing stifle its free flow and expansion and expression in our lives. Jesus puts up five red flags in this passage:

- 1) **IN AWARENESS OF OUR INCLINATION TOWARD SELF-CENTEREDNESS AND CARELESSNESS IN WORSHIP, JESUS SUMMONS OUR ATTENTION TO THE IMPORTANCE OF COMING TO THE ALTAR OF GOD**

Matthew 5:23 - “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you....”

I know that our patterns of worship don't correlate exactly with those of the Jewish system Jesus addressed in these words. But there is still something pivotal to these words that *does* carry over as an abiding principle of New Testament worship: Jesus endorses the importance of a specific *place* where people come to *present themselves* to the Lord.

Because we live in a fallen, distorted, distracted world, and because we only **gradually** unwind our souls from its grip on our minds and our habits, we need to remember that it was, from the very beginning, God's idea to call people to distinct, separate, specific **times** and **places** to pursue Him. And He did this even though both He and we knew He was present **everywhere**, all the **time**.

In other words, the fact that we could know Him and love Him and adore Him **everywhere** in **everything** we did, didn't do away with the need of **specific** times and **separate** places of consecration and worship.

Right from creation, God established a **separate day**, one day in seven, when people would turn their minds and hearts to Him. It was not just that people would **worship** God on that day. More importantly, they would **not** do anything else that day. In other words, their worship was intentionally **separated** from the rest of their routines.

So this special day each week wasn't **designed** to teach that God could be worshiped all the time. That is certainly true. But this day was designed to teach that God was **different** from everything else they thought about - everything else they gave their affection to - and everything else that consumed their weekly time.

Then He established, among His own people, the **places** where He was to be worshiped. People came to the **tabernacle** - the tent of meeting. Then they came to the **temple**. In the New Testament they came first to synagogues, then to house churches, then to established congregations in church buildings. The design of the place wasn't the important feature. The important point was, again, that people would, in this way, be forced to leave **other** places and **other** activities to give large blocks of **undivided** attention to God.

Now, we don't live in the Old Testament era. We know the Holy Spirit has come to make the presence of God **portable** in our lives. We all know that Jesus is just as much with us at the office as He is in church. No one with any understanding would deny that truth. In Him we live and move and have our being.

So, I think it is safe and accurate to say, at least in a sense, **all of life is worship**. I can think

about Him and honor Him and love Him everywhere I go. I worship at work. I worship at church. And that idea is true as far as it goes. The problem is, in the thinking of many Christians, the idea isn't thought through carefully enough.

True, I worship at church and I worship at work. But the worship of those two places *isn't the same*. I don't worship at **work** the way I'm **called** to worship at **church**. And I don't worship at **church** the way I'm **called** to worship at **work**. There is something specifically special about each. At work I offer up my daily tasks in **service** and in **witness** in a way I never do in the church.

Fair enough. But there is something special - something **fueling** about the way I worship at church. That is the worship that **enables** and **feeds** the mind and will to worship at work. I can worship at work **because** I faithfully worship at church. The **general** worship is possible because of the **specific** worship. The worship of God **everywhere in general** is the natural fruit of the disciplined, frequent, consistent worship of God **somewhere separate and specific**.

What I'm saying is you need the **bones** of worship to support the **life** of worship. That's why we worship on the Lord's Day - the **first** day of the week. We don't come together any more to worship on the **last** day - the **seventh** day - because we're not looking **forward** in hope to our redemption (except in the sense of still looking **forward** to the final consummation of our redemption at the Second Coming of Jesus).

In terms of God's atoning sacrifice for sin we're not living in an age of **promise**, looking forward to **accomplishment**. We live in an age of **fulfillment, living in the strength of the Resurrection of Jesus and the life of His Spirit**. And worship on the Lord's Day fills the life up with strength on the **first** day to prepare and enable the worship and service of the following **six** days.

But church, listen, we are still called to come to the altar - to keep the specific **times** with God - to fill our lives in a **different** and **special** way with the worship of this specific time and place. And the Lord's Day is the key piece in this devotional structure. In heaven such a day will not be necessary. It will have served its purpose. But while here on earth, while we travel a way filled with temptation and self and clutter and distraction, we all need **specific reminders** (that's why

Jesus called the church to keep the Lord's Table and the sacrament of Believer's Baptism) to alert our dull minds to spiritual truths.

So we **come** to the altar. We **offer** our gifts. Why? Are we trying to **earn** God's grace with our works and rituals? No. We come and we worship and we give because we have already **received** grace and want to **stand** in that grace until Jesus comes again.

The freedom of the Spirit is **not** freedom **from** habits and disciplines of holiness. It's the freedom - the power - to **renounce** anything that would **keep** you from walking in disciplined habits of worship. It's not freedom to **abstain** from worship without consequence. It's freedom to maximize and receive from worship.

2) THE BEAUTY OF NUTRITIONAL HABITS OF WORSHIP CAN BE EMPTIED BY THINGS WE CANNOT SEE WITH THE PHYSICAL EYE

Matthew 5:22 - "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

Who but Jesus could get away with preaching and teaching like this? He starts His lesson with a man coming to the **altar** and ends up warning about the **fires of hell**. That's quite a distance to cover in a thirty second remark. And you can't help but get the impression that hell was a distinct possibility in the mind of Jesus for this worshiper, in spite of the fact that he was right there, at the altar, with his gift! Like I said, who but Jesus would have the **nerve**, or the **right**, to talk like this?

Do we realize how dangerous **anger** is to our souls? Do we stop to consider, even when we worship, that God sees everything we carry in our hearts into the sanctuary? Do we ever carelessly allow ourselves to think that the **visible** is more important than the **invisible** in the shaping of our destinies? Or do we ever allow ourselves the luxury of foolishly dreaming that the offering of our **gifts** or **resources** or **attendance** somehow cancels out anger or resentment toward a brother?

Jesus identifies this as **the** fatal mistake that can creep into worshiper's hearts. Worship is

precious, but it is not *indestructible*.

3) **GOD WANTS TO USE THE SPECIFIC HABITS OF WORSHIP TO PURIFY MY MIND AND HEART**

Matthew 5:23 - "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you...."

Underline those words, "***and there remember.***" He comes to the altar, and ***there*** remembers about his brother. He didn't remember this before. It wasn't like this was constantly on his mind. As he came to the altar - as he offered his gift, specifically to the Lord - ***there, he remembered the situation with his brother.***

This isn't the first time we've seen this happen in this series on worship. Exactly the same thing happened with the Prophet Isaiah. When he saw the Lord, high and lifted up in His temple, Isaiah thought seriously about the uncleanness of his lips - his speech - his words. Something about seeing the blazing holiness of God made him feel undone.

Isaiah didn't get out of bed every morning and say, "Woe is me, for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips!" No. That revelation came as he came to the Lord in worship. The simple habit of coming before the Lord in distinct habits of holiness will ***activate*** the cleansing work of God in your life. People who aren't careful about cultivating deep habits of worship will soon lose the capacity to identify and respond seriously to their own sin. Without worship people won't ***see*** sin. They will see it in ***others***. But they won't see ***their*** sin as really sinful anymore.

Many people aren't going to believe what I'm going to say now, but that's only because North American Christianity is rapidly becoming a "***shop for what you like, and don't bother with anything not to your tastes***" kind of religion. Here's the truth - ***people would keep their lives spiritually cleaner, have fewer problems in their marriage, raise their kids closer to the Lord - all without the addition of any seminars, podcasts, books, conferences, or experts - if they just came to church more often and more consistently. Period.***

Without doing ***anything else***, God would, like Jesus taught in this message on worship at the

altar, reveal His will, show them what they should do next, keep them from sins that would otherwise bring bondage into their lives farther down the road.

And here's the tragedy of what I just said. Many people here right now, **refuse to believe that**. You've already closed your mind with a thousand smart thoughts as to why this simply cannot be true. There **must** be some other way. There isn't.

God has **designed** habits of worship to quicken our pulse in regard to pursuing holiness. He will work to keep **relationships** clean (that's what our text is all about) as people worship Him. Think about the application to **marriage** and the **raising of children**. Specific times of sacredness are **mandatory** for a clean home.

Listen church, the more you are in the House of the Lord, before the altar worshiping, the more the Holy Spirit will cause things to bubble up to the surface of your life that would otherwise **rot and turn malignant** in your soul. **Good** worship - **regular, disciplined** worship - doesn't just allow the Holy Spirit to **bless** us. It allows the Holy Spirit to **cleanse and heal** us.

4) **JESUS WARNS ABOUT THE FUTILITY OF DISOBEDIENT WORSHIP**

Matthew 5:24 - "...leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

As if spelling this principle out **once** wasn't enough, Jesus **repeats** the same idea over and over again in different words:

Matthew 5:7 - "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

Matthew 6:12 - "...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Cut it any way you like. Only **merciful** people **receive** mercy. Only those who **have** forgiven their debtors **receive** forgiveness. The idea isn't unclear. It's just stronger than we are comfortable swallowing. **Why** must this worshiper go **first** to his estranged brother **before** he continues in his worship? Because his worship is **lifeless and useless** until he goes to make things right with his

brother.

Are there people you don't like talking to in this church because of something that happened in the past? Are there people you don't like in this church? Please remember Jesus' words in this passage - ***if you don't want to talk to them, God doesn't want to talk to you.***

How many praise songs - how many prayers - simply bounce off the ceiling because people ignore this principle (and hope God will ignore it too)?

5) **GOOD WORSHIP IS BEST EXPRESSED WHEN IT IS ACCOMPANIED BY A RUSH TO OBEDIENCE**

Matthew 5:25-26 - "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. [26] Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

Jesus uses two ***time*** words in this teaching. Both of them are very important. One we've already looked at in **verse 24**. I'm to go to my brother **first**- ***before*** I try to worship the Lord.

But, not only am I to go ***first***. I'm to go ***fast***. Jesus used the word ***quickly*** in **verse 25** - "**Come to terms quickly with your accuser....**"

Why quickly? Because the longer you wait, the more you lose the ability to turn the situation around. Bondage creeps into your heart. You've given place to the devil and you are surely losing your freedom with each hour that passes.

To make this point stick, Jesus puts two ideas in juxtaposition. Notice how His parable ends - **Matthew 5:26** - "Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

Do you see the contrast? Jesus says, "**Act quickly or you will pay lengthy consequences for your *tardiness!***" According to Jesus, ***keeping out*** is easier than ***getting out***. It is never ***safe*** to

worship God with an ***unwilling heart***. Such worship is ***dangerous*** because God takes particular displeasure in sin He has already ***exposed*** in His worshiping people, but which they are unwilling to confront and deal with. We so badly want to just keep worshiping. And, in the words of Jesus, that puts people in prison - ***for a long time!***

Saints, don't come to church in chains. As your ***heart*** soars in praise, make sure your ***mind*** grows in understanding, and make sure your ***feet*** are swift to run in the direction of God's commands. It's the only way to stay free.