

Worship Matters

The Principles of Public Worship

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

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Scripture

Our text today is simply a background for what I have to say. I would like to draw your attention to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The church at Corinth had a number of difficulties. One area in which they were having difficulty was public worship. Their Order of Worship was in reality a Disorder of Worship. Anyone who wanted to do so sang or spoke in tongues or interpreted, and so on. It was chaotic and confusing. So Paul gave a general principle in 1 Corinthians 14:40: *Worship must be done decently and in order.*

Let's see how Paul said it in 1 Corinthians 14:26-40:

²⁶What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. ²⁸But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. ³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, ³²and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. ³³For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. ³⁵If there is anything they desire to learn,

let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

³⁶ Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? ³⁷ If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸ If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. ³⁹ So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:26-40)

Introduction

God created the world and everything in it for his own glory. However, mankind fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, and ever since that time we have struggled to worship God properly. In fact, Paul tells us in the first chapters of his letter to the Romans that our foundational sin is idolatry. We constantly exchange the glory of God for a lie, and we worship and serve created things instead of our Creator.

When the Spirit of God regenerates us, he also puts into our souls a desire to worship our Redeemer. However, that desire needs to be guided by the word of God. If it is not guided by God's word, it will lead to all kinds of error.

Lesson

I would like to set down five principles of public worship that are important for our understanding of worship.¹

¹ These principles are taken from Robert A. Morey, *All of Life Is Worship* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1984).

I. Internal Worship Is Distinct from External Worship

The first principle of public worship is that internal worship is distinct from external worship.

If you fail to grasp the distinction between the two, then your public worship will be hindered.

Let me distinguish *internal* and *external* worship for you.

Internal worship refers to the inner attitudes of the heart and mind while engaged in worship. It refers to the subjective feelings in your heart while worshipping. Internal worship has to do with your spirit, and only you and God know if you are truly worshipping. Internal worship is not perceived by the five senses and other people cannot judge whether or not you are actually engaged in internal worship.

External worship, on the other hand, refers to the outward acts of worship that are composed of what you say or do while engaged in public worship. Unlike internal worship, external worship is perceivable by the senses. Therefore, others can see and judge what you are doing. External worship also refers to the forms, liturgies, orders of service, and so on, which comprise the sensible parts of public worship.

II. Internal Worship Is the Essence of True Worship

The second principle of public worship is that internal worship is the essence of true, biblical worship.

Internal worship is absolutely essential. Internal worship has to do with the *essence* of worship while external worship has to do with the *form*, or outward acts, of worship.

Scripture makes it crystal clear that God is more concerned with your attitude, or your heart, while engaged in worship than with what you do or say.

Jesus said, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

God said to Samuel when he was seeking a king to replace Saul, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Every time you come to worship God, God is examining your heart. He takes off the outer coat of your actions and looks at your heart. God is not so concerned about the externals of worship as he is about your heart.

Furthermore, you must prepare your heart for public worship. You cannot just walk in unprepared on a Sunday and expect to meet with God.

What would you do if you had an invitation to meet with the President tomorrow morning at 10:30 a.m.? Would you stay up late and watch TV? Would you get up late? Would you be late for breakfast? Would you get to the meeting place at the last minute? Or would you get there ahead of time? Would you take a few minutes the night and morning before to make a few notes to prepare for your meeting with the President? Of course you would! You wouldn't dream of walking into a meeting with the President half asleep, a few minutes late, and unprepared. Now if you would do that for the President of the United States, why would you think of doing anything less for the King of the Universe?

III. It Is Possible to Have the Proper External Worship without Having the Corresponding Proper Internal Worship

The third principle of public worship naturally flows out

of the second principle. This principle states that it is possible to have the proper external worship without having the corresponding proper internal worship.

This is what is called “hypocritical worship.” When your external worship does not correspond to what is really going on in your heart, you are guilty of hypocritical worship.

Jesus pointed out this problem in his day. We read the story in Mark 7:1-8:

¹Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ²they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) ⁵And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ ⁸You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

Jesus simply echoing the complaint that God voiced to Isaiah. Throughout history people have gathered to worship God. They have gone through the motions. They have sung songs. They have said prayers. They have done what the order of worship called for. But their hearts were far from God.

Have you ever sung a hymn while your mind was day-

dreaming? Or, have you anxiously turned over some problem and not paid attention to the Bible reading or the sermon?

If you have, you were guilty of hypocritical worship. God was not glorified by your worship. You honored God with your lips but your heart was far from him.

All of us must admit to our shame that we are all guilty of hypocritical worship at times. The remedy is simply to ask God to forgive us and to grant us his Spirit to enable us afresh to worship him from the heart.

IV. Internal Worship Is Possible Only in the Context of a Relationship Between a Redeemed Sinner and a Holy God

The fourth principle of public worship is that internal worship is possible only in the context of a relationship between a redeemed sinner and a holy God.

Ask yourself: What is the foundation of internal worship? On what grounds is your worship offered to God?

Internal worship is the spiritual privilege purchased for every believer by the precious blood of Christ. It is therefore the birthright of every child of God. The foundation of internal worship is the atoning work of Christ. Paul says in Ephesians 2:18 that it is through Christ that we have access to the Father: “For through him [i.e., Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

The writer to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 10:19-22: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,

with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Your worship is acceptable to God only if it is offered through Christ and cleansed by Christ. His blood and heavenly intercession make your worship acceptable to God.

It is entirely possible to go through the motions of worshipping God through external worship. You attend public worship services, you participate in the services, you sing, you pray, you read Scripture, you give money, you confess the faith, you listen to the sermon, and you even participate in the sacraments. You may do this faithfully, week after week. But if you are not reconciled to God, if you have never come into a right relationship with God, then know that God sees your heart and he knows that your heart is far from him.

You may be able to fool others in the service. You may be able to fool the pastors and elders. You may even be able to fool your spouse, or your children, or your parents. But remember, you cannot fool God. He, and he alone, sees your heart. And you and God know where your heart is.

Perhaps you are sitting here today and you have never had your sins cleansed by the blood of Christ or you are not sure that the blood of Christ has cleansed your sins. This may be your first time here at this church or maybe you have been coming here for a long time. Whatever your situation, I invite you right now to ask God to reconcile you to himself by the blood of Christ.

Tell God that you have not been worshipping him in spirit and in truth. Tell him that you have been merely going through the externals of worship. Tell him that your heart has been far from him. But today, right now, you want him to change your heart. You want to worship him in an acceptable way. Ask God to forgive you your sin. Ask him to apply the

shed blood of Jesus Christ to you and to your sin.

V. Worship Must Be Biblical

Finally, the fifth principle of public worship is that it must be biblical. That is to say, public worship must be ordered by what has been historically called “the regulative principle of worship.”

The Scripture is clear that God is to be worshipped according to his directions. God has stated in Scripture by way of precept, command, example, and principle the way in which he is to be worshipped.

God has repeatedly told his people that they were forbidden to add to or subtract from the worship he had revealed. For example, Deuteronomy 12:29-32 states:

²⁹ “When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, ³⁰ take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.’ ³¹ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.

³² “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.”

When Nadab and Abihu “offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them... fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Leviticus 10:1-2).

Even though God had not forbidden the fire they wanted to offer, it was rejected because it was not the kind of fire directly commanded by God.

Korah, Dathan and Abiram all tried to institute things that were neither commanded nor forbidden by God (Number 16:1-40). When they attempted unauthorized worship, the ground opened up and swallowed them, and fire consumed their followers.

We should not be surprised that Jesus commands that worship must be offered to God “in truth” (John 4:24). In another place Jesus says that God’s “word is truth” (John 17:17). In other words, Jesus is saying that worship must be offered to God structured by his word.

Worship reformers developed the phrase, “the regulative principle of worship.” This principle states: *Only what God has commanded in Scripture is to be allowed in worship.* Nothing is to be viewed as essential to divine worship if it is not commanded in Scripture.

What are the elements of worship? Our *Book of Church Order* (47-9) puts it this way: “The Bible teaches that the following are proper elements of worship service: reading of Holy Scripture, singing of psalms and hymns, the offering of prayer, the preaching of the Word, the presentation of offerings, confessing the faith and observing the Sacraments; and on special occasions taking oaths.”

These elements are also called the essentials of worship.

Now there are also non-essentials—or circumstances—of worship. The non-essentials of worship are left up to the freedom of conscience and the edification of the church. A non-essential element is some thing or act whose presence or absence does not invalidate worship. It is a matter of convenience, culture, and aesthetic taste. They refer to where, when,

and how we worship. Whether worship is in a barn or a sanctuary is unimportant. Choirs, pews, church bells, robes, and so on are all examples of non-essentials of worship.

Paul's writing to the Corinthian believers gives us some general principles that guide Christian freedom and the edification of the church. He asked the Corinthians to judge their public worship, particularly regarding the non-essential aspects of worship, by answering the following questions:

- Does it glorify God (10:31)?
- Is it commanded in God's word (4:6)?
- Does this action promote order or confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40)?
- Is it fitting and proper (14:40)?
- Does it edify the body (14:5, 12, 26)?
- Is it the way of love (14:1)?

Paul does not refer the Corinthian church to a prescribed order of service revealed from God. He points them instead to a mature and responsible exercise of their priestly freedom in the non-essential aspects of worship.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that true worship takes place in the heart. No matter how good the external elements of the worship service, unless you are worshipping God in spirit and truth—in your heart—you are not truly worshipping.

Examine your heart every time you come to worship to see if you are truly worshipping God from the heart.

May God help each one of us to worship him in a way that is holy and pleasing to him. Amen.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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