

Moving from Membership to Discipleship: Worship
John 4:19-26
January 29, 2012

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he.”

Today's sermon brings us to the half-way point in our series on the six disciplines of the Christian life. We've talked about Bible study. We've talked about prayer. And today we'll look at the proper place of worship in the Christian's life. To do this, we'll discuss worship from the corporate side and from the private side.

The corporate side of worship is what you see here today. Corporate worship happens when the body of Christ comes together to acknowledge, thank, praise, and petition the only and true triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Corporate worship is absolutely necessary to the life and well-being of the church. Corporate worship is also absolutely necessary to the spiritual life and well-being of the individual Christian.

Some people will tell you, “I don't have to go to church to be a Christian.” And, you know what, that's true. But my answer to that statement is, “Without going to church, how long do you think you'll remain a Christian?” The odds of never attending church and staying a good, grounded Christian are about the same as the odds of winning the lottery.

Now, having said that I must explain something. I'm not talking about people who don't attend corporate worship because they can't attend; people like our shut-ins, or people who have no way here, or people who are homebound caring for someone else. These people have no choice. Their health or their condition or their love for another are keeping them from worship attendance.

I'm speaking here of people who willfully refuse to attend regular worship with the rest of the body of Christ. I'm talking about people who have the foolish notion there is no connection between the church and the Christian. I'm talking about people who want to be part of the family of God and never associate with the family of God. The church is one of the few organizations that has regular meetings and allows people to call themselves members without attending any of the meetings.

Christians who willfully divorce themselves from the corporate church have placed themselves in the very high risk category of people who could easily lose their faith. Let me tell you a story that demonstrates what happens to those who separate

themselves from the church.

A member of a certain church, who had always attended services regularly, suddenly stopped coming to church. After a few weeks, the Pastor decided to visit. The Pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire.

Guessing the reason for his Pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made himself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, he watched the flames dance around the burning logs.

After several minutes had passed, the Pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and lifeless.

The Pastor glanced at his watch and realizing it was time to leave, he slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow, once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the Pastor reached the door to leave, his host said, "Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I'll be back in church next Sunday."

When you cut yourself off from the church, you are cutting your ties with the very organization which God established for the spiritual health and welfare of his children here on earth. Furthermore, you are not only hurting yourself you are cheating to rest of the church body by denying them the support you have for them.

This is a two-way street. All of the brothers and sisters here today are here to support you and you are here to support them. Listen, once again, to the writer of today's epistle lesson: *Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another*

(Heb 10:24-25 NIV).

Everyone knows to be a disciple you must follow the master. So, we should look to see what Jesus did when it came to going to church. Here are a few statements on whether or not Jesus went to church.

Matt 12:9 *Going on from that place, [Jesus] went into their synagogue*

Matt 13:54 *Coming to his hometown, [Jesus] began teaching the people in their synagogue*

Matt 21:14 *The blind and the lame came to [Jesus] at the temple*

Mark 1:21 *They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue*

Mark 3:1 *Another time [Jesus] went into the synagogue*

Luke 4:16 *[Jesus] went to Nazareth . . . and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue,*

as was his custom

I think that makes the point. Jesus went to church. If we are to be Christians - Christ ones - followers of Jesus we are to be in church.

That's corporate worship. What about private worship. I've gone on, at some length, to stress the importance of worshipping together, but is there such a thing as worshipping in private? Sure there is. However, private worship is not so much a special thing you do as it is a lifestyle.

Private worship is a personal communion between you and God. A communion which permeates every aspect of your life. Private worship means that everything you do and say should be a service of worship to the Lord. Private worship means that everything in your life brings praise and glory to God.

Here are some ways to bring private worship into your life. You worship God through your relationship with his Word. You worship when you read his Word, when you study his Word, when you teach and preach his Word, and when you share his Word with the lost, the lonely, the hurting, the ones who are just worn out by this world.

You also worship God when you keep his commandments. That's another way for you to publicly acknowledge that God is God and you are not. Keeping God's commands for your life gives witness to your faith and faithful witnesses reach the lost.

Private worship occurs when you pray to God. You are worshipping when you lift up others in prayer. You worship when you take requests to God admitting that he is the only one who can bring good things to life. And you worship when you stop to offer up a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord, the author of all blessings.

Another act of worship is the sacrificing of your body. Not physical death but the kind of sacrifice made by those who are in service to God. When you place God's priorities above your priorities, you are sacrificing. When you stop thinking about yourself and start thinking of others, you are sacrificing. When you give up the things you want for the things God wants, you are sacrificing. Every good work which a Christian does in the name of God is an act of sacrificial worship.

And, of course, you worship God when you return to him a proportionate amount of what he has given you so that the work of his church might move forward. We're going to talk more about this act of worship in a few weeks. For now, I will say this. You worship God when you depend more on him and less on the things he has given you. Your tithes and offerings are an act of worship.

The last thing we need to do is to consider this question. Are you worshipping weekly or weakly. It sounds rather flippant, but it's not meant that way. This is actually a very serious question. How are you worshipping? Weekly or weakly. Is your corporate worship life regular and vibrant or is it sporadic and lackluster?

How about your private worship life? Is it filled with the things we looked at; Bible study, witnessing, praying, good works, giving? If your answer to that question is no, there's something else I want you to consider.

True worship will never leave you thirsting for something else. True, heartfelt worship is filling and fulfilling. I've heard people say, "I'm just not getting anything out of the worship." My answer to that is what are you putting into worship? You can only get out of worship what you put into worship.

If you want to make your worship life all it can be, sing with all the gusto you can, pray every prayer from the bottom of your heart, serve God and your fellow man with all the love you have in you, treasure your Bible as the life-giving nourishment of your soul that it is, and give back to the Lord in proportion to how he has given to you.

If you feel like God is far away, start worshiping. The Bible tells us that God inhabits our worship and praise. When you worship, God is present. More important, when you worship you are in God's presence.

A quick review. The Bible is God's love letter to you. Praying is God's open line so his children can keep in touch. And worship is thankful response to God for all his love for us. It's also our entrance into his presence. My prayer for you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is that your lives become an unending act of worship to our Lord.