

“SINCERE WORSHIP”

In the passage we studied last week, the Preacher showed us that there is a better way to conduct our lives in this world, especially with regard to the work that the Lord has given us to do in this life. In this passage, the Preacher turns his focus to man as a worshipper, and he shows us that there is a better way to conduct our worship. While the only way to escape the vanity of this life is to live as a worshipper of the one true God, these verses warn us that there is a kind of worship that is just as vain as everything else in this life under the sun. There is a kind of worship that is empty, unprofitable, and unacceptable in the eyes of God. In order to avoid offering this vain and empty worship, the Preacher tells us that it is of the utmost importance that our worship be sincere. This is one of many biblical texts that confront the sin of externalism: that is, going through the motions in our acts of worship without having a living faith in God. This passage can teach us three important lessons about sincere worship: *sincere worship is reverent; sincere worship is expectant; and sincere worship is faithful. These are the points we will explore in this sermon.*

The Preacher begins by instructing us about *the importance of reverence in our worship*. He says, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.” He is telling us that we are not to come to worship casually or carelessly. It is not enough for us to make the effort to show up for worship. We need to prepare ourselves for worship so that we can worship the Lord with our hearts, and not merely with our lips. “Guard your steps” means ‘watch what you are doing.’ Realize what is taking place in worship. Think about

who it is that you are dealing with. If we fail to prepare for worship, we will almost certainly be irreverent in our worship. We will offer the worship of fools. And the Preacher makes it very clear how the Lord views that kind of worship. Insincere worship is evil. As commentator Derek Kidner puts it, “to be casual with God is an evil.” [53] This is the kind of worship the Preacher is warning us against.

We need to pay careful attention to this warning because, as the Preacher says, the irreverent worshipper does not even realize that he is doing anything wrong. On the contrary, he thinks that God is pleased with the fact that on one Sunday out of four he gets up (even though he was up till 1:00 a.m.), throws on a shirt, and strolls into church a few minutes after the service has started. Of course, he does not really want to be there. His mind wanders. He keeps thinking about what he is going to do when the service is over. He finds it difficult to stay awake during the sermon. But he believes that his presence in worship has made God happy. He has fulfilled his duty. The foolish worshipper may think such things, but the Preacher tells us that he could not be more wrong. God takes no pleasure in that kind of worship. He calls it evil.

One reason why the Lord calls this kind of worship evil is because it fails to display any true gratitude, and gratitude is an essential component of sincere worship. The grace that the Lord lavishes upon his people in Christ exceeds our wildest imaginings. We see this in Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, where he tells the Ephesian Christians that he prays that the Lord would grant them the ability to be able to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. We will never be able

to sound the depths of this love, but if we have a living faith in Christ, we know it in part. And the only proper response to this love that surpasses knowledge is a response of heartfelt and sincere gratitude, the kind of gratitude that is neither flippant nor casual.

The key to worshipping God reverently is to keep ourselves mindful of what takes place in worship. The Preacher reminds us that in worship we are drawing near to God. We are meeting with the Lord of all creation. God is certainly present everywhere, but he meets with his people in a special way in corporate worship. It is true that you can have communion with the Lord out in nature, or when you are driving in your car, or when you are having your daily devotional time. It is true that every believer should strive to always be aware of the Lord's presence. We are called to walk in the Spirit, to worship God in all of life, offering every part of our day-to-day lives as a living sacrifice to him. This is certainly true. However, it does not mean that there is nothing unique about corporate worship. On the contrary, the worship that we offer the Lord in day-to-day life flows out of our corporate worship on the Lord's Day. God makes his glory known in a special way when his church gathers for worship and makes use of the means by which he communicates his grace to us. This is why the Bible speaks of corporate worship as drawing near to God.

There is nothing in this life that is more important, more monumental, than the regular, corporate worship of the people of God on the Lord's Day. For this reason, if we are going to worship reverently we need to carefully prepare ourselves for worship each week. Jeremiah Burroughs makes this point when he urges us:

“Learn to account the duties of God’s worship as great matters. They are the greatest things that concern you here in this world, for they are the homage that you tender up to the high God...and those things wherein God communicates Himself in His choice mercies.

Now, these being such great matters, there is cause that we should prepare for them...Business of great consequence we make preparation for.” [Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship*, 53-4]

This is what the Preacher is saying in this passage. Do not come to worship casually. Do not trifle with God. Realize who it is that you are approaching. Reflect upon his goodness and mercy, his patience and provision, his holiness and splendor. Take God seriously.

The second thing that we can learn about sincere worship from this text is that *sincere worship should be expectant*. We see this when the Preacher says that it is better “to draw near to listen” than to offer the sacrifice of fools. When he says “listen,” he is talking about paying careful attention to God’s Word. He is talking about believing and obeying what we hear when we come to worship. The purpose of preaching is not to entertain us, or build up our self-esteem, or provide us with practical tips on how to get what we want out of life. Preaching is not even primarily about providing us with new information. The purpose of preaching, as the apostle Paul says in Acts 20, is to build up

Christ's church and give us an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. Our Lord uses the preaching of his Word as the primary means by which he gathers in his sheep and perfects them in their faith. But the preached Word will not have this effect in our lives if we hear it but fail to put it into practice. True listening requires effort on our part. It requires us to allow what we hear to sink down deep into our souls. It requires us to look for the fruit of the Word in our lives.

There are many ways in which we can be hindered from listening carefully to the preached Word. Our minds can easily wander. We may find the sermon topic uninteresting. We may find it difficult to stay awake, especially if we stay up too late on Saturday night. The way to overcome such obstacles is to come to worship expecting to hear a message from God. We should listen to the preaching of God's Word in the same way that Paul said the Thessalonians listened to his preaching: "when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" [1 Thess. 2:13] Do not be a sermon critic. That is a surefire way to inoculate yourself against the preached Word. Be a hearer and doer of God's Word. By all means, test what is said in the sermon against the Scriptures. Make sure that the things being preached are truly reflective of what the Bible says. But do not allow yourself to be overly concerned with such things as a preacher's style. Listen for the voice of Christ, speaking through his Word. For that is what takes place in true preaching. Christ himself preaches through his preachers. This is why the apostle Paul could tell the church at Ephesus that Christ came and

preached peace to them. [see Eph. 2:17] It is astonishing that Paul would say such a thing, because Jesus never traveled to Ephesus while he was on this earth. But Paul could honestly say that Jesus preached to the Ephesians because he preached through Paul's preaching. Christ continues to preach to his sheep through his ministers today. And because this is true, we should come expectantly when we draw near to God in worship. We should come expecting to hear Jesus Christ speaking to us.

The third thing that we can learn about sincere worship from this text is that *sincere worship should be faithful*. The Preacher develops this theme in verses 4-6, where he addresses the subject of religious vows. The vows that he has in mind are the voluntary, conditional vows that the Israelites were permitted to make in their worship. These were vows in which people would promise to offer a sacrifice to the Lord if he answered a particular request. We find laws regulating these vows in Deuteronomy 23. In our text, the Preacher largely echoes what is said in that passage, telling us that those who make such vows need to take care that they follow through with them. Otherwise, they will be taking the name of the Lord in vain.

While the passing away of the sacrificial system has resulted in the passing away of this particular kind of religious vow, there is still a place for vows in the Christian life today. While some people have pointed to Jesus' teaching about oaths and vows in the Sermon on the Mount to argue that oath-taking has been abolished in the New Testament era, this is a misinterpretation of that text. Jesus was not speaking against oaths altogether but against a particular way in which oath-taking was being abused by many of

the Jews in his day, a practice that essentially allowed people to find loopholes to get out of the things that they had vowed to do. Furthermore, the New Testament contains several instances in which the apostle Paul swears oaths. [see Gal. 1:20; 2 Cor. 1:23; Phil. 1:8] Clearly, Jesus did not intend to abolish the taking of vows and oaths altogether.

And for this reason, we continue to make use of vows and oaths in our worship of God. When people become members of our church, they take vows in which they profess their faith in Christ and their commitment to live as his followers. When people present their children for baptism, they take vows to express their commitment to teach their children the gospel and nurture them in the faith. When people get married in our church, they take vows to remain together “in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live.” There is even an oath-taking aspect to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Sacraments are not only signs and seals of God’s faithfulness to us. They are also pledges of our devotion to God. This is why Calvin defines a sacrament as “a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him.” [*Institutes*, 4.14.1] We can see this aspect of the sacraments in passages such as Romans 6, where Paul refers to baptism in his teaching on why Christians need to live a new life and no longer remain under the dominion of sin. Because we have been baptized into Christ’s death, we must consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. In the words of our Westminster Confession, the sacraments solemnly engage us to the service of God in Christ. [WCF 27.1] If you have been marked with the sign of Christian baptism, if you

feed upon the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, you have been consigned by oath to the Lord. Your life is no longer your own. You are obligated to live as one who truly belongs to him.

When we apply the teaching of this passage to the vows that we take in church membership, in the sacraments, and in marriage, we begin to see that these things are not to be taken lightly. God takes the words that we speak seriously, and he expects us to take them seriously as well. Of course it is true that we fail to perfectly fulfill the vows that we make. We are not always faithful to the things we promise to the Lord. And in this way we are made all the more aware of our utter dependence upon Christ. But this is not to excuse us from striving with all that is within us, in reliance upon Christ's power, to be faithful to what we have vowed to the Lord. He would have us do no less.

The Preacher sums up his teaching in this passage by reminding us of the vital importance of living in the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is what makes the difference between sincere worship and vain worship. If there is no fear of God in our worship, if there is no reverence, no expectancy, no faithfulness, then our worship is empty. In fact, it is worse than that. It is evil. The only kind of worship that is acceptable to God is sincere worship, worship that is offered in the fear of the Lord. Here again is Jeremiah Burroughs:

“[T]here must be much reverence and much fear when you come into the presence of God to worship Him. You do not glorify God as God unless you

come into His presence with much fear and reverence for His great name... Now this fear of God should indeed be in the soul, and expressed outwardly when you are in the assembly, by such reverent carriage in prayer that if a heathen were to come in, he would see God's name sanctified and might say, 'How great is this God that these people worship!' [*Gospel Worship*, 93, 96]