

PRAYER

GOD'S CALLINGS ON HIS CHURCH: PART 2

PS. 62:5-8 & LK.18:9-14

BY PASTOR JIM LINCOLN ON APRIL 27, 2008

Last Sunday we began to consider the callings God has on us as a fellowship of Christians who have gathered to nurture the hope we have in the Lord Jesus and as we are able to spread that hope here and around the world. In the weeks ahead I want to consider one passage each Sunday that corresponds to each call. Lord willing, God will speak to us with a new resolve and devotion to these things. Often, these are called *The Great Ends of the Church*. The list includes things like: Worship, Prayer, Discipleship and Outreach or Witness. With a little tweaking I think you will find that these are the same corporate goals of most any historic Christian church.

CORPORATE WORSHIP

Last Sunday we started with the glad privilege and duty of corporate worship from Ps. 100. David gave us three fundamental realities about worship that can save us from much foolishness and nonsense in worship. First, He taught that ***Worship comes to us as a Command and not merely as an invitation***. He wrote, “*Shout joyfully to the Lord, Sing to the Lord, Know the Lord, Come before the Lord, and Serve the Lord.*” These are commands, not suggestions. He doesn’t call you to worship if you happen to be in the mood for worship. These are commands and they are joyful ones at that, when you consider God, as He is, and what He has done to make worship possible for us. If you have no joy in worship, you are simply not laying hold of God as He is. So, the first question we should have about worship is, “What does God expect of me in worship that I might serve Him with joy?”

Unfortunately, doing church as a consumer industry has changed our question. Now it’s is often, “*What do I expect the church to do to serve my preferences about*

worship?" That's just how consumerism works. In the process, the value of a thing in and of itself can get lost. Unfortunately, as churches market worship to consumer preferences the value of God, simply for who He is will take a back seat to the more pressing value of consumers preferences.

The word *SERVICE* in a *worship service* will refer to how the consumer expects to be served not how God expects to be served.¹ So, when you come to worship, do you come to serve the Lord or to be served? Second, **God is the only worthy object** of worship. So, we must resist the temptation to worship our worship or make more of ourselves than we do of God Himself. God and God alone deserves to be the object of our worship. Finally, the reason all this is true is because **God is the only One worthy of our worship**. Too much attention on ourselves, our preferences and desires will not meet the deep need of our hearts to worship God. It's in Him and this gospel that we find our only eternal hope.

William Temple offers this thoughtful and very biblical definition of worship,

Worship is the *quicken*ing of our conscience by God's holiness; the *nourishment* of our minds with His truth; the *purifying* of our imagination by His beauty; the *opening* of our hearts to His love; the *surrender* of our wills to His purpose; and all of these gathered up in adoration - the most selfless emotion by which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.

- William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury

So, may God be worshiped here and in this place by a glad and obedient people!

¹ When the church serves the demands of the consumer, Biblical worship gets turned on its head (cf, Rom.12:1ff) Biblical worship is about the worshipper becoming consumed, in service to God, and meeting His preferences not the other way around.

PRAYER

Today, I want to pick up the second calling that God has put before us as a fellowship. He calls us to be **a praying people**. Like worship, prayer is also something God calls us to practice in community. Corporate prayer can be a great cure for the self absorbed and self consumed which is a bug that can bite any of us. By definition, prayer diverts most of your attention away from yourself and on to God. At least it should. Also like worship, prayer comes as a command. James says, ***“Confess to one another and pray for one another.”*** Notice he didn’t say, “Confess your sins *for* one another and pray *to* each other.” Most of us can sense it when a prayer turns from addressing God to a mini sermon for the benefit of those who are present. And when we do this, God is no longer the object.

In our text this morning God tells us that when our praying is regulated by His word, that He takes great delight in our prayers. Beloved, our prayers please Him; He wants to be asked and amazingly so, He seeks us out to have fellowship with us. So, this morning I want to fold two together two passages, one from Proverbs 15 and one from Luke 18.

TWO TEXTS ON PRAYER

First, Pr.15:18 gives us two big lessons about prayer. Second, the two men at prayer in Luke 18 illustrate these same two lessons. I hope to close with some lessons and promises of Jesus about prayer.

The first lesson about prayer in Pr. 15:18 contains a warning: **Prayer can actually be an abomination to the LORD.** The second lesson is, (and there couldn’t be a greater contrast)...**Prayer can bring the LORD great joy and delight.**

First, Proverbs offers us a terrible warning about prayer that God wants us to know about. He says in the first part of Pr. 15:8, "*The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD.*"

Now the reason I've said that *prayer* can be an abomination when it says "*sacrifices,*" is because the prayer of the upright in the second half of the sentence corresponds to sacrifices in the first half of the sentence. There is a parallelism here. Prayer is a sacrifice of time, effort, and thought. Peter speaks of the sacrifices of praise, which is a kind of praying. Sacrifices themselves are a kind of prayer or communication offered up to the Lord, acknowledging His holiness. Both prayers and sacrifices can be abominable to the Lord.

And that sounds strange to us because God talk today has been co-opted by the belief that God tolerates every kind of religious expression no matter how or what it is. In our day, God is way too nice to abominate anything. But, beloved, this is a serious thinking error about God. But, how is it that God would find the sacrifices...sacrifices He prescribed in Leviticus, an abomination? Isn't that exactly what the wicked are suppose to do...offer sacrifices for their sins? Can you understand my question? What else would the wicked do to find favor with God but to offer sacrifices and pray to Him?

Don't you think He's saying that there is a way that we can do religion, pray or offer God the sacrifices of our time, money, prayers that is far removed from and even opposed to what He intended by the commandment to pray or offer sacrifices to Him? Even in the Old Testament, God was never after religious ritual or sacrifices that didn't reflect or match the heart of the worshiper.

Deut. 10:16 says, "Circumcise *your heart*, and *stiffen* your neck no longer." Jer.4:4, "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart." Ps. 51:17, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."

Jesus said in Mark 12:33, "TO LOVE HIM [God] WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND TO LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF, **is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.**" If our praying and religious practices don't match our hearts that are broken and contrite before God, then, God finds that hypocritical and an abomination.

Now, of course this isn't a popular view of God. But think about this for a moment. If God tolerates everything and calls everything good then He has no hatred of evil. So, to tolerate everything is to object to nothing.

What kind of God thinks it is just fine for men to sexually abuse boys and girls, even if they do so under the guise of religious belief? The spiritual leader of the fundamentalist Latter Day Saints, is serving a prison sentence for having been found guilty of two counts of raping young girls. Many of his followers moved to Texas and are now under investigation for more sexual abuse of young girls. They argue that it is God's will for them to do this. Is it a good thing to tolerate any religious expression? What about little boys and girls who have been abused? Thank God there is a judge who said, it is God's will for her to stop it, if indeed it is happening. Sexual abuse is an abomination to the Lord. Also, why is it that we find such practices, even under the guise of religion an abomination? We do so because of our Christian heritage and the teachings of the Lord Jesus. Lk.17:2 *"It is better for him that a millstone were hung about his neck, and he be cast into the sea, than that one should offend one of these little ones."*

You never heard anything like this from the Greek or Roman cultures in all of their glory. Children were routinely abused in both cultures. Fathers had the legal right to kill their baby girls if they didn't want to keep them. It was the Christians who went into the forest and by the seashore and rescued thousands of baby girls abandoned by their fathers.

The Aztecs brutally killed children, holding up their beating hearts to the sun and the moon, so that the gods would allow the cosmos to carry on. Cortez and his men were horrified. No wonder, Christianity was so easy to embrace in Central America. Why do we find such sacrifices an abomination? We do so, because where the

teachings of the Lord Jesus have prevailed by God's mercy it awakens the law in our hearts that it is wrong to abuse children.

Beloved, there are things that God hates. And hate is a necessary counterpart to love. You can't love your children and not hate child abuse. The idea that God loves every religious expression is foolishness. He doesn't. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord.

But there is something else God hates that we don't feel as much in our souls. He hates it when we come before Him in prayer with a proud heart.

JESUS' PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR AT PRAYER (LK.19:9-14)

And He [Jesus] also told this parable **to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt .**

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: *'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'*

Now, the Pharisee had a great reputation in the community, as a conservative and religious person. He had a high standard of morality. But, his heart was swollen with pride. He really didn't need God. The record of his own moral and religious accomplishments stood on its own (in his mind).

Yes, he does begin by saying, "I *thank* God that I'm not like other people." But Jesus made it clear that he wasn't really grateful to God for these things at all. Yes, he

says, "I thank God." And it does sound sincere but it's about as sincere as the word, "Dear" in the greeting of a letter to the IRS. You might write, "Dear sir." However, that may not be the true reflection of your heart.

He really believes his religious and moral life qualifies him for an audience with God. If God judged everyone on a bell curve, surely he would be found righteous. His trust and confidence really isn't in God at all. Notice that he's the subject of every sentence. "I'm not like others. "I fast...", "I tithe..." "I'm not like the swindler, the unjust, adulterers, I'm not like this tax collector." It's relentless, endless, autobiography. His heart remains unbroken, stone cold and unmoved by his own sin or need of forgiveness or the need of the man next to him. It's filled with accolades about himself and contempt toward others. It's an abomination to the Lord even if it comes in the expression of a prayer.

When the heart of the one praying trusts in the record of his own righteousness, and holds others with contempt, judging them, prayer turns us away from God not closer to Him. On the other hand, David says in Ps. 51:17, "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." Beloved, what's in your heart? Judgment, self-congratulation, contempt or mercy, humility and amazement at the grace of God to receive sinners like us. So, beloved, let's be careful when we pray.

Second, by the grace of God, the Proverb doesn't end there. He also says,

"THE PRAYER OF THE UPRIGHT IS GOD'S DELIGHT!" PR.15:8B

What a glorious word of promise! If we are upright, God is joyfully taking great delight in our prayers. But again, we have questions. David asked, "**Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?**" (Pr. 20:9) Who can claim to be upright?

Isaiah 66:3 gives some insight into who the upright are in contrast to those who

bring abominable sacrifices. Isaiah describes the wicked who bring their sacrifices this way: *“He who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man (murder)...”* He says that their sacrifices are an abomination (3) to the Lord on par with murder. He tells us why in v. 4. He says, *“When I called, no one answered, when I spoke they did not listen.”* God found them abominable because the people refused to listen to His voice.

But notice what Isaiah says about those whose prayers God heard? It’s in v.2, *“This is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at My word.”* Who is an upright person? It’s one who humbles himself before the Lord, with a broken heart and who trembles at His word.

John Piper wrote this about this text, *An upright heart is one that, “feels precarious in the presence of God. It trembles at the hearing of God’s word because it feels so far from God’s ideal, and so vulnerable to His judgment and so helpless and sorry for its failings.”*

You can’t get this with a casual relationship with God’s word. If the word isn’t disturbing us, correcting us, laying bear our sin and need for His grace and mercy, if there is no trembling at God’s word, or sense of being undone, exposed and vulnerable before His all consuming holiness, we’ll miss what it means to be upright. Yes, it includes a changed heart that learns to love His ways, but being upright doesn’t mean being without sin. If we put our trust in Him as our Lord and Savior, He gives us the record of his perfect righteousness as a gift to be received by faith. His work makes us upright.

David said it this way in Ps. 32, *“Blessed is he whose transgressions is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Many are the pangs of the wicked but the steadfast love surrounds him who trusts in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.”* The upright is the one who trusts in the Lord...in the mercy of God to forgive, help, save and change us. The upright heart magnifies the grace and power of God and elevates His sufficiency. It displays it to all the heavenly beings, it displays God’s grace to all who will pay attention to what has happened to us. It spreads the hope we have in Him. It puts the wonder of his

power and love on display. And God then takes great joy and delight in our prayers because they will speak of His purposes to reconcile sinners to Himself through faith in His Son, The Lord Jesus. And that grace also makes us fall in love with doing good as well.

PRAYERS LIKE THESE ARE A FRAGRANT AROMA TO THE LORD

The small community I grew up in had a bakery in the middle of town. On Saturday mornings would drive down to pick up Saturday morning donuts and “spudnuts.” When you got about a half a block from the Holsum’s Bakery you could begin to smell the aroma of fresh bread and donuts baking in the ovens. The rich aroma of that bakery was so inviting and so delightful that you lost all resistance to its will. God says, “The prayers of the upright are His delight.” Our prayers are the aroma of God’s favorite food.

"But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' [Jesus said,] I tell you this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."

SO, BELOVED, LISTEN TO JESUS ON PRAYER.

“Pray and don’t lose heart.” Lk.18:1

“Pray for those who persecute you.” Mtt. 5:44

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases...” Mtt.6:7

“Pray like this, “Our Father who art in heaven...”

“If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” Jn.15:17

AND WITH AN UPRIGHT HEART JOIN OTHER IN PRAYER,

“They devoted themselves to the prayers.” Acts 2:42

“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with {an attitude of} thanksgiving;”
Col.4:2

One of the benefits of joining a prayer meeting is that it’s almost impossible to get distracted and wander in your thoughts when you are with others. It’s amazing how focused you can become when you join your prayers with those of others.

“Pray without ceasing.” And as Jesus and the apostles did, set aside times of prayer. We need both because we will never go deep with God on the run no matter how often you do.

The sacrifices of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord. But the prayers of the upright (the broken, those who tremble at His word, those who have come to love the gospel of grace) in them he takes great delight. “ - Pr.15:8. Amen.