

DRAWING NEAR TO GOD vs GOING TO CHURCH

I am pretty sure that most people in the world, even among so-called “Christians,” there is little or no understanding or appreciation for what worship is really supposed to be about. That is one of the reasons why church assemblies over the past ten of fifteen years have taken an unholy turn towards becoming almost an entertainment venue. I have no doubt that those who are involved in such things have the best of intentions. Their goal is to create a worship experience for people by manipulating their minds and emotions through inspiring music, stories, lights, testimonies, feel-good sermons. With this approach, people are basically spectators and they will leave such times feeling very much like they have worshiped God because of the things which they experienced—the sights, the sounds, the stories, etc.

There is another approach to worship which is equally faulty which is more likely what we in the churches of Christ are familiar with on a week to week basis. This is the view that worship consists of certain acts that are to be done on the first day of the week. Those acts include such things as singing, partaking of the Lord’s Supper, making an offering, praying and engaging in a study of the Word. The assumption is that if a Christian shows up and is engaged in these acts, then God has been worshipped in spirit and in truth as called for in John 4:24. Only if the preacher or speaker’s message is particularly inspiring or challenging, will anyone leave feeling anything or being fundamentally changed in any way.

I would submit to you, neither approach to worship is biblical. The first because the target audience of worship is the worshippers themselves; the worship leaders are trying to get the worshippers to feel or experience something. The second approach is not biblical even though it is correctly directed towards God, because it assumes that if people engage in certain acts at certain times God will somehow be honored and worshipped. What both approaches miss is the awareness that worship is fundamentally an offering to God; an offering the individual brings or gives to God.

And that brings us to the question of why are you here this morning? Why did you come? Some of you when you awakened this morning or somewhere in those early moments may have raised the question, at least in your own mind, “*Am I going to church this morning?*” Whether or not you raised that it is obvious you did decide to come. You are here, but the question I want you to ask yourself, is, not just “*Why am I here?*” but more importantly, “*Where am I?*” Do we realize that we haven’t just “come to church,” or “come to worship?” If we are to here to worship God in spirit and in truth, it is critical for us to realize that we have come into the very presence of God.

I want to invite you this morning to open your Bibles to the book of Hebrews where in a few minutes we will be looking at some things found in chapter 10. Before we get to that however, let me give you some background on this passage that may help you understand some things better.

First of all we need to understand that under the old covenant, which we call the Law of Moses, most people were not encouraged, or even allowed to approach God. We know from a study

of the Old Testament that only descendants of the tribe of Levi could assist in the work of the Tabernacle, the place where worship under the first covenant was first established. But not every Levite had a part in offering up the burnt offerings and the burning of incense. While all priests were Levites, not all Levites were priests. From among those who were priests, one particular individual would be selected to serve as the high priest for the Israelites. Now contrast that with what is said about those who are disciples of Christ.

- Look at **1 Peter 2:5**, for example. Writing to Christians, Peter says: *“you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*
- **Revelation 1:6** tells us that Christ loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, *“and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*
- Well that fits with what Paul wrote in **Romans 12:1**, doesn’t it? Paul said, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”*

Do you get the picture? Under the first or old covenant, most people were not priests and they didn’t have the privilege of offering anything to God. They were commanded to bring the sacrifices, but the actual offering of those sacrifices was done by those who were priests. Under the second, or new covenant, every Christian—and that is without distinction, young or old, male or female, rich or poor—each one is a priest and is to be engaged in offering up their sacrifices.

Now let me ask you, and I want you to really think about this, is that why you have come this morning?

Now look at **Hebrews 9:1-7**:

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. 2) For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. 3) Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, 4) having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. 5) Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. 6) These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second (that is the second section, which is also referred to as the “holy of holies”) only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.”

Now, do not get lost in all of this; try to understand what I’m getting at here. The Jewish people as a whole did not come into the presence of God. They didn’t actively worship God. They needed priests to intercede for them. They needed a high priest to enter into that holy of holies for them. Those were things done by the priest and in a unique way, by the high priest.

In **verses 11 and 12** of **chapter 9**, the writer contrasts all of that with what Christ did when he offered himself upon the cross. The scripture says,

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

Verse 15 then makes clear that by Christ's offering of himself, he became the mediator of a new covenant. Now I want you to see what that new covenant makes possible for people who through obedience to the gospel of Christ enter into that new covenant with God. Look at **chapter 10**.

In **verse 1**, the writer explains that the Law, which was but a shadow of the good things to come, could not "*make perfect those who draw near*" to God. Well, what does that mean, and what does that have to do with anything? We can understand that better if we keep in mind what the writer is doing. He is contrasting what the many sacrifices under the Law could not do with what the one sacrifice made by Christ could do. Those many sacrifices could not make perfect those who would draw near to God. So what does the one sacrifice of Christ do? It perfects those who draw near to God. Look at **verse 14** (chapter 10): "*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*"

There is a whole lot to think about in that verse. The single offering, of course is Christ offering himself upon the cross. Now some want to take that passage and try to prove "once saved always saved" with it. That isn't what the Hebrew writer was saying, and the rest of chapter 10 proves that. In verse 35 he urges these Christians to not "throw away their salvation." Well, if it is impossible for them do that even if they wanted to, why would the Hebrew writer have to exhort them to not do it?

What I want you to see is that verse says that Christ sacrifice not only made forgiveness possible, it also perfects those who are being sanctified. You say, I don't really understand that. No one is perfect, at least not in the sense of being sinless, and that is true. The idea of perfection in this context is not referring to sinlessness, but rather to that condition, or quality, that is essential for one to come into the presence of God. Christians are made perfect, that is, made holy, not because they are sinless, but by virtue of their sins continually being cleansed by the blood of Christ.

So what that means is that Christians have the privilege of coming into the presence of God. Look at **verses 19-25**.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20) by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21) and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22) 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. 23) Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24) And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25) not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Because of what Christ did for us on the cross, a way—a new and living way—has been opened up for us. That way, which is through Christ’s sacrifice allows us to do something that under the first covenant only the high priest could do once a year, and that is to be able to come into the holy of holies itself. That’s where we are—or perhaps I should say, that’s where we have the opportunity to be.

Well, why are we here? I don’t mean, why do we come to the assembly, but why do we come into the presence of God? The answer is we have come, not just to be coming to church, or even coming to worship. We have come not simply to fulfill our duty; not simply to engage in five rituals—singing, praying, offering, Lord’s Supper and listening to a lesson from God’s Word. We have come to spend time in the presence of God in order that we—each one of us, individually—can offer God our sacrifices. What sacrifices have we come to offer?

We have come to offer to our God, through the name and blood of our Lord, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, an offering of thanksgiving and praise for all that God has done and is doing for us. **Verse 15 of Hebrews 13**, says: *“Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.”* Now, obviously that is not something that we can only do for about an hour one day a week. When Jesus told the Samaritan woman that the hour was coming when the worship of God would not be limited to a specific place, by implication he was also saying that worship is also not limited to a specific day or time.

Well, if that is the case, then why do Christians need to come together at all? Why do we need to assemble with one another if we can worship God anytime and in any place? The answer to those questions is very simple. When we were washed from our sins, and born again as it were, God made us a part of His people, His kingdom. What does he call it in **verse 21** (chapter 10)? He calls it *“the house of God.”* What did we read a little earlier from **1 Peter 2:5**? *“You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.”*

What Christ has done for us, through the sacrifice of himself is that he has made it possible for all of us to be one in Him. The Bible says we are members one of another. We are His body, and together we work and worship God. That isn’t to say that we can only work or worship God when we are together, but it is saying that Christianity is not just a private thing I have going with God! I believe that is why the Hebrew writer said there in **chapter 10, in verses 24 & 25**: *“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”*

Some of you are the ones being spoken of here in verse 25. You are neglecting the meeting, or the assembling together. You may think, *“That isn’t true. I’m here practically every Sunday morning.”* Yes, but the writer did not say don’t neglect the Sunday morning assemblies. He said, *“don’t neglect meeting together.”* That isn’t just talking about Sunday morning assemblies. It is talking about being a part of the body. If you are staying away from the various assemblies of the church, such as Sunday night or Wednesday night, or like the fellowship dinner we will share following this morning’s service, do you think maybe you might be guilty of resisting God’s desire for you to be a part of the body?

A couple of weeks ago I touched on this same issue, and brother Todd told me that my lesson failed because only about a half of the number that were there that morning returned that night. Well, I feel bad about that but I want you to know that the reason I feel bad about it is because I’m afraid some of you have stopped listening and you are hardening your hearts towards God. You don’t hear Him trying to reach you anymore.

That is why it is so important that we realize where we are and why we have come. We have come because we have been made perfect by the blood of Christ and now we have the privilege of being in the very presence of God.

Did you know (I know some of you do) that God wants you to worship Him? That’s what Jesus said in John 4:23 isn’t it? We might wonder, *“Why does He want that?”* For sure He doesn’t need it! It isn’t something that He has to have. Why would what we do make any difference at all to this One who made the heavens and earth? Well, the Bible makes that clear to us, I think. **Genesis 1:26** tells us that God made us in His own image, but let me close with a look at the **100th Psalm**. I think this explains it pretty well. The Psalmist writes:

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! 2) Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! 3) Know that the LORD, he is God! **It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.** 4) Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! 5) For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Why does God want us to worship Him? Is it because of some infinite-sized ego that He craves all of this attention and praise? No, that’s not what is going on. God wants us to worship Him because He made us, and we are His, We are His people! Last Monday my son who now lives in Bixby sent me a text and asked, *“Are you off today? Are you up for a visit?”* Even though we had friends here at the time—Jerry and Rosa Fouts—I sent an immediate reply, and I said, *“Yes! I’m off and we would love for you to come over.”* They came and all of us, including the Fouts went out for dinner together, and later that evening, as my son and his family began to leave, they all made their way to both Letha and I and gave us a hug and a kiss, and told us they loved us. They didn’t come because they wanted anything, or needed anything, other than having a desire to be with us.

Now, don't ask me if I want that! Don't ask me if I love that! Of course I want it! Of course I love it!

Do you suppose God might be like that? He leaves the light on for us! He has left the door unlocked, come any time! He's cleared the way for you. He is looking forward to your coming. I hope when you leave here this morning, you will be glad you came, not to church, nor even to worship; but glad you came into the very presence of God!

The lesson is your and the Lord's invitation is open. If anyone wishes to respond for any reason this morning, please come while we stand and sing.