

The Way We Worship

Week 7

God is ALWAYS present and at work. This is an axiom we like to run with around here. Meaning, this is our running assumption. It is true regardless if we recognize it or not, if we're paying attention to it or not, even if we believe it or not. God is ALWAYS present and at work.

So what does this have to do with our topic of worship? Well, one way we can look at worship is it's our intentional effort to pay attention to the presence and work of God (in our own lives, in the lives of those around us, and in the world in general), along with our cooperation with Him in His work. The Biblical writers, most notably Paul, would call this being "*filled with the Spirit*" or "*living in the Spirit*" or "*keeping in step with the Spirit*", since God's Presence and activity is in and through His Spirit. (see Romans 8, Galatians 5, Ephesians 5)

As we wrap up our series on worship we want to focus on this very important aspect of the Christian life...our relationship with the Holy Spirit. It is important to realize that even the faintest desire to worship, the tiniest turn of attention toward God, the smallest spark of interest in God is, in fact, the work of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. Or to say it another way, none of us got to where we are in our Christian life without the initiating work of the Spirit, nor will we grow any further without the continual work of the Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit is pivotal if any of our effort is to be fruitful, and is actually the initiator/originator/source of the desire or interest of such effort.

- *What do you think and feel about the axiom "God is always present and at work." Is there anything that causes you to question or doubt it? Or, what causes you to trust/believe it? What practical difference does it make in your life?*
- *How attuned are you to the Holy Spirit in your life? What helps you stay attuned? What tends to disrupt your attentiveness to the Spirit?*

This being the case, worship, then, is about us opening ourselves to the Spirit, yielding, surrendering, submitting to the Spirit in our lives, availing ourselves to the Spirit's leadership in our lives.

In an interesting juxtaposition, when Paul discusses life in the Spirit (again, see Romans 8, Galatians 5, Ephesians 5) his consistent contrast is with life run by the flesh/sinful nature, and the differing fruit/results that come from the Spirit vs the flesh/sinful nature.

Back in week 1 of this series we considered how worship is a God-oriented life as opposed to a Self-oriented life. This is simply a different way of saying life according to the Spirit versus life according to the flesh/sinful nature, as Paul would put it.

The question we now want to consider is HOW do we cultivate life in the Spirit? Again circling back to week 1, we mentioned that worship begins with a certain posture, one that properly

recognizes who God is (Sovereign Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer) versus who we are (cherished yet fallen creatures; tarnished image-bearers; beloved yet corrupt children), thus a posture of submission (bowed down; prostrate) is in order. Even the ability to recognize that, along with the willingness to respond accordingly, is the work of the Spirit. In other words, such recognizing and responding isn't natural, it's not our default position. As we continue to worship (in all the various, manifest ways we've discussed through this series, and in Soul Training Exercises over the past few years), and as we continue to yield and cooperate with the Spirit moving in our lives, the more natural this posture/position becomes. In this way, worship is both a means AND an end (see week 4).

This brings to mind the attitude of John the Baptizer. In the Gospel of John chapter 3, as Jesus was in the early stage of His public ministry, some people went to John the Baptizer and said, "*Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about, well, He is baptizing, and everyone is going to Him.*" (John 3:26), to which John replied, "*He must become greater; I must become less.*" Or as some translations state it, "*He must increase; I must decrease.*" (John 3:30) This is the posture we want to cultivate, and it's also the fruit that such a posture has been cultivated. (Both/And; Means/End)

We live in a world that tells us in many ways to maximize ourselves...to be all that we can be...to make something of ourselves. This message is conveyed in a myriad of ways (often subliminally), but the fruit of such messaging is a Self-oriented life.

- *How do you/we counter the cultural forces around us towards self-aggrandizement? What sources can you identify that communicate the message (false-narrative) that "It's all about me."?*

Interestingly, the stories of many noteworthy Saints tell of intentionally moving from wealth, nobility, and notoriety to poverty, of purposely choosing a life of downward mobility. (Was this prompted by the Spirit, or a fruit/result of responding to the Spirit? Yes, both.) Just to name a few of these Saints...

- Francis of Assisi (Founder of the Franciscan Order)
- Katharine Drexel (Founder of Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament)
- Ignatius of Loyola (Founder of the Society of Jesus...aka Jesuits)
- Catherine of Siena (Member of the Dominican Order)
- Teresa of Avila (Member of the Carmelite Order)
- Benedict of Nursia (Founder of the Benedictine Order)
- Armand Jean le Bouthillier de Rance (Founder of the Trappist Order)

...just to name a few. And many other Christians have intentionally shifted from a life of relative ease to a life of simplicity, from a life of prestige to a life of obscurity, from status to anonymity, out of a commitment to faithfully follow Jesus. Isn't it interesting that the list above are all Catholics? Downward mobility has been a struggle—perhaps a blindspot—for Protestants, generally speaking, and it's certainly NOT an American value. (And don't even get me started on the "prosperity gospel" ...that's a tirade for another time.)

- *What do you think/feel about intentional downward mobility? As you pay attention to your inner dynamics, do you notice more invitation or resistance to such an idea?*

Scripture and history demonstrate that life in the Spirit, keeping in step with the Spirit, being filled with the Spirit is inherently counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. It is also not something we do all on our own, under our own power and resources. Perhaps it is helpful to think in terms of a dance partner. The Spirit is our dance partner, and leads us through the steps of the dance. But some of the “dance steps” may be rather foreign to us. Like most things, it takes practice for it to become natural and normal.

As we learn to follow the lead of the Spirit, the change (we may even call it a “conversion” of sorts, or a transformation) that occurs in our hearts is we go from seeing God’s commands/laws less as “rules” that we follow out of fear, to understanding them as HOW we connect with, relate to, love the One who first loved us. There is admittedly a mystical/mysterious dimension to all this. Again, in a very hard to explain way, worship is both a means that leads to such a change/transformation, as well as the end result of this change/transformation. Equally mysterious is how the Holy Spirit is both the catalyst of this change and the consequence of this change being a life full of the Spirit. Weird, right? But crazy cool! Thankfully, the ability to explain (or even understand it) is not required, just simply trust. God is always present and at work, drawing us into union with Himself. God invites us into relationship and into partnership with His work, and He does the heavy lifting. But that’s not to say that we just sit back and do nothing.

- *When you sit with God privately and/or when you attend a corporate worship gathering, how do you imagine what is happening? How would you articulate what is occurring? How would you describe the WHY behind what you’re doing?*

Allow me to expound a bit on a passage in Ephesians.

*Therefore consider carefully how you live—not as unwise but as wise, taking advantage of every opportunity, because the days are evil. For this reason do not be foolish, but be wise by understanding what the Lord’s will is. And do not get drunk with wine, which is debauchery, but **be filled with the Spirit**, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-21, emphasis added)*

Before I jump in, let me get technical here and explain a little bit about Greek grammar. An imperative verb is a command. In this case “be filled with the Spirit” is the imperative (the command) It governs everything that follows through Ephesians 6:9. Participles (underlined above) are verbs that describe how the imperative is to be done, or what it looks like to fulfill the command. So, to parse it out, it would look like this:

- Be filled with the Spirit. (the command)
 - How? By...speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
 - How? By...singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord
 - How? By...giving thanks to God...
 - How? By...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

(Remember, again, worship is both a means and an end; the Spirit is both the cause and the effect. So in this case, speaking, singing, thanking, and submitting are not only HOW we are filled with the Spirit but ALSO the evidence that we are filled with the Spirit.)

Some quick observations:

- Much of this smacks of “worship” language that we’re accustomed to (psalms, hymns, songs, singing, music, thanks).
- Notice the subtlety of communal/external and personal/internal (“...to one another...” denotes being gathered together, whether that’s two or three people or two to three hundred people, while “...in your hearts...” may be together or alone, but certainly on an internal level.
- The use of the word “reverence” certainly suggests worship as the motive.
- Hmmm, but what are we to make of the controversial word “submitting...” especially if we were to follow the rest of the passage?

Now, I suspect, when it comes to our experience of “worship”, we’re comfortable with the speaking, singing, thanking part...and probably not so comfortable with the submitting part. (Are my suspicions correct?) If it makes you feel any better (and this is crucially important) in this passage “submitting” is a participle NOT an imperative. Additionally, this list or description should not be considered exhaustive, but simply representative. Though, if we are resistant to submitting to one another, we probably ought to pay attention to that and figure out why.

As mentioned earlier, life in the Spirit will change our lives...sometimes radically so. If you’re familiar with the rest of the passage in Ephesians 5, and on into chapter 6, you know that Paul goes on to illustrate what submitting to one another can look like in household/familial relationships.

- Be filled with the Spirit. (the command)
 - How? By...speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
 - How? By...singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord
 - How? By...giving thanks to God...
 - How? By...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.
 - For example...wives and husbands...
 - For example...children and parents (and particularly fathers)...

- For example...slaves and masters...

It is important to recognize what Paul is doing here. He took very familiar relationships of his day, all of which had a clearly understood power dynamic, and he turned it on its ear. What Paul says to wives, children, and slaves was nothing new, par for the course. BUT...and this is so key...Paul instructing husbands, fathers, and masters under the category of “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” was REVOLUTIONARY. Telling those with understood, unquestionable, undisputed power that they, too, needed to submit in recognition of the risen, reigning Lord Jesus was EXTRAORDINARY. Historically, even globally, as far as we know, this was the first time anyone suggested such a change in the culturally understood power dynamics. People in power don’t just give up power. But in light of Jesus, in light of Love, power needs to be reimagined. This will only happen if/when people are motivated by the Spirit; and this will also be evidence of the Spirit at work in people’s lives.

All that to say, when we see power struggles, power grabs, abuse of power, poor stewardship of power WITHIN THE CHURCH, it is a clear indication that those doing so are not being led by the Spirit. (I say “within the Church” because power struggles etc. should be totally expected in the world. We shouldn’t expect non-believers to behave like believers.)

- *We don’t often think of how we relate with one another (and particularly about power dynamics) when we think about “worship”. How does it change/affect our understanding of worship if we do?*
- *How might examining our use of power, and maybe even relinquishing power, be an act of worship?*

In Galatians 5:25 Paul writes, “*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*” As fish need water, as humans need air, Christians need the Spirit...and we have the Spirit, graciously poured out to all who believe. This is the reality we live in. Worship is our response to that reality. Anything we do to “*keep in step with the Spirit*” is Worship. Earlier in that same paragraph Paul describes the result of cultivating a life that is in step with the Spirit, “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*” (Galatians 5:22-23; and not an exhaustive list.)

It all begins with the Spirit, and the end result is the Spirit’s life and character becoming infused into our life and character.

P.S. If you’re interested in reading a bit more about downward mobility, click the link below.
<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leadaquietlife/2024/02/embracing-downward-mobility-choosing-a-different-success/>

Soul Training Exercise ~ Lectio Divina ~ Galatians 5:16-26 -OR- Romans 8:1-17

Latin for Divine Reading. The desire is to encounter and surrender to the Living God by attending to Scripture. Lectio requires a humble, listening posture that is alert to the voice of God in Scripture.

Lectio

First read the text (lectio). You give it a slow, focused and naive reading of the passage.

Meditatio

Then re-read the same passage paying attention to what word or phrase stands out.

Oratio

Third, offer a simple prayer in response to God.

Contemplatio

After prayer, the text is read for the third time with the focus on listening for the Voice of God (contemplatio). This is a gift of grace and cannot be forced. Here is where you are hoping to interact with God, listening for His voice. You can ask the question, *"Lord, what do you want to do inside me?"*

Actio

Finally consider your response to God's Word and grace (actio). How can you make your life a gift to others in response to the Word?