

## What If Jesus Was Serious...About The Church?

Week 6: Chapter 29 ~ 35

### Chapter 29 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Why Doesn't The Church Worship On Saturday?

It was right about a year ago that the topic of Sabbath came up (in Ruth Haley Barton's *Sacred Rhythms*). Whereas RHB focused more on finding the rhythm of work and rest, Skye's focus in this chapter is more about the connection between Sabbath and freedom from bondage (though he'll get to the point of rest in the next chapter). As he says, "*At its core, Sabbath is about freedom from bondage, not merely rest from activity.*" And he goes on to say, "*For the Christian, the Sabbath isn't just a day of rest or worship; it's a day for mission and justice.*"

I feel the need to add a little bit to what Skye says in this chapter. I think his thoughts in this chapter could, inadvertently, support/reinforce some thinking that we actually want to dismantle. What do I mean by that? Well, it's important to remember that the Church is not defined by the day we meet, regardless of what the focus/emphasis is. Or, to say it another way, the Church is the Church 24/7, not just when we meet together. To say it yet one more way, we are the Church when we are gathered AND when we are scattered.

The Church, primarily, is WHO we are and only secondarily WHAT we do as a result of understanding who we are. So, yes, on whatever day we gather together the focus should be on worship, justice, and mission—i.e. loving God, each other, and our neighbors near and far—but that should really be our focus every day. It just takes on a different flavor when we do it together as opposed to when we do it apart.

The reason I bring this up is because all too often Christians think of "church" as a place we go and an event we attend as opposed to a unique people in the world (our uniqueness, of course, being we live with Jesus as our King). So when and how we meet is of far less significance than we tend to make it. Or, to say it another way, form ought to follow function, and something ought to be defined by its function not its form. But, unfortunately, we tend to identify/define "church" by a very particular form—the congregational form, meeting on Sundays, for "services" that tend to center on song, sacrament, and sermon. But we could meet at a park on a Wednesday, a home on a Tuesday, a coffee shop on a Monday. And we can worship with other means than song, sacrament, and sermon as well. Even though, historically, churches tend to gather on Sundays—for understandable reasons—that's not what makes a church a church. Part of the reason we're going through this particular study is to stretch our imagination beyond the same formulaic template that may not be fulfilling the function it once did.

- *How would you feel about the weekly gathering of your church family being in someone's home on a Thursday evening (as opposed to 9 or 11 on Sunday morning at 71st & Shadeland)? What would you feel was lost by that? What would you feel might be gained by that?*

## Chapter 30 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Church Should Practice A Rhythm Of Rest

I've got a confession to make. Four days after our daughter was born (who spent the first three days of her life in the NICU) I was back in the office. One of the elders of the church, and a dear friend of mine, called into the church office, and I happened to be the one to answer the phone. He was quite surprised, and not particularly happy, that I was back at work. To paraphrase what he said, "Get your butt home, and don't come back for at least a week."

Why did I go back to the office in such short order? No one expected me to do so. Truth be told, it was due to an inflated sense of self-importance. I prided myself in my work and what I accomplished (for God, of course).

In reflection, I'm really glad I was in an environment that valued family and prioritized work/life balance. I could not have articulated it at the time, but I was running with some false narratives of God, the church, and myself. (Remember the importance of true vs. false narratives from the Good & Beautiful series we went through back in 2022?) I'm also thankful that I've learned and embraced better narratives and practices that have led to a healthier rule of life.

But enough about me, what about you?

- *How would you describe the pace and priorities of your life? And how is it forming you? Do you work from your rest or rest from your work?*
- *When you think about church or reflect upon your experience of being part of the church, does it seem more like work or rest? Does the service or contribution you provide and the way you participate in the life of the church come from a place of enjoyment of God and an offering of love or from a sense of duty or "somebody's gotta do it"? Explain.*
- *Skye reminds us, "God has not redeemed us merely to put us to work." Do you believe that? Does your life reflect that? Elaborate.*
- *When/how have you functioned from an inflated sense of self-importance? How about from needing to be needed? How has that impacted your life and relationships? How did you become aware that you were functioning from an unhealthy place?*

## Chapter 31 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Than True Worship Is Never Transactional

This chapter harkens back to James Bryan Smith's book *The Good and Beautiful God* which explores our narratives about God. What does God want/expect of us? What do we want/expect from God? What is the nature of the Divine/human relationship?

While it's a bit cliché to say that the Christian faith is about relationship not religion, it is nevertheless true. What does God want from us and for us? Relationship with Him. What should

we want from God? Or, what does God offer us? Relationship. This relationship is not the means to some other end (health or wealth or prosperity or safety...etc.).

Perhaps it is because we are finite, limited creatures who are at the mercy of chance (natural disaster, disease, etc.) and other ill-motivated humans (war, greed, injustice, oppression, etc.) that we look to God to provide something for us that we can't provide ourselves, to control all the factors that are beyond our control. But that doesn't seem to be God's main concern, as much as we may wish it was. God is more concerned about the type of people we are becoming (Hmmm, "becoming" ...that should ring some bells), and God can use any/all situations and circumstances we face toward that end. The real question we need to ask ourselves is whether that is enough for us? Do we want that too?

Worship, then, is simply about us expressing our love to God...not about trying to get God to do something for us.

- *Why do you worship? Or, what are you seeking when you worship?*
- *Deep down, do you really, truly believe that God enjoys you, adores you, desires a deep relationship with you? If so, how does that belief express itself? If not, what do you think it would take for you to believe that?*

### Chapter 32 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Worship Is About Seeing God's Intrinsic Value, Not His Usefulness

- *What is Jesus worth to you/us? How is that reflected in your/our life?*

Have you ever entertained such a question? It's a perfectly reasonable and fitting question given the topic of "worship". That question and this chapter draw to mind a parable Jesus told and a story from His life.

First, the parable...

*"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought the field.*

*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."* (Matthew 13:44-46)  
(Yes, it could be argued that these are two parables...but the point of each is the same.)

The story is of Jesus' encounter with the rich, young ruler found in Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18. This young man came to Jesus asking about how to acquire eternal life. Initially Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. The young man assured Jesus that he had. Jesus then proceeded to tell him to sell everything he had and come follow Him...at which point the man walked away, unwilling to part with his riches.

Quick point of clarification: eternal life, the kingdom, following (being a disciple/apprentice of) Jesus...we're talking about one and the same thing. According to Jesus, such an opportunity is worth EVERYTHING!

Is that what Jesus is worth to us? Jesus clearly understood/understands that unless the world sees people (individually and collectively) who value Him that much, they won't believe the Gospel. And the goal is never to grow a bigger church but rather to help people see the intrinsic worth of Jesus.

- *From your experience and perspective, do people view Christians/the Church as those whose ultimate aim is to magnify Jesus or as those who have some other aim? Explain.*
- *If someone were to attend a worship service at CUMC, do you think they would walk away thinking, "Wow! Those people are REALLY into Jesus."? Or, to ask it differently, what would someone walk away thinking we really value? And what makes you think that?*

### Chapter 33 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Collective Worship Is Inseparable From Collective Justice

We become like what we worship. So, if God cares about justice, then naturally those who worship God develop into people who care about justice as well. (Conversely, if we don't become people who care about justice, then either we're not worshipping properly or our understanding of the God we worship is off...or both) But make no mistake, the Bible is very clear that God cares about justice...which is why Loving Others is coupled with Loving God.

Sadly, due to rampant consumerism, it is very challenging for people to not have a transactional mindset regarding worship...a "what's in it for me?" mentality as they approach God. Worshiping God and following Jesus are meant to break that attitude and transform us into people who are becoming ever more like God.

- *Do you naturally connect worship and justice? Explain*
- *What values do you/we hold that reflect the values of God? What values do you/we hold that do not reflect the values of God?*

### Chapter 34 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Beautiful Worship Is How The Church Defies The World

As I've mentioned numerous times in the past, as Americans we have been formed by consumerism in ways we hardly understand. We've just sort of absorbed it, unconsciously, unintentionally...nevertheless it affects us greatly. One of the ways it affects us is seen in how we view the church and worship. Until we untangle ourselves from consumerism (which is much easier said than done) we will tend to approach church and worship from a self-centered point of view...i.e. What do I get out of it? Do I like it? How does this benefit me?

But the church and worship are meant to point us and others to something beyond ourselves, to a different reality, and allow us to connect to that Reality and be formed by it. A God-centered reality (which we call the Kingdom of God) functions on a very different value/priority system than the world we inhabit. We, as the church, are meant to be formed by that value/priority system and reflect it to the world around us. Worship is one of the practices that helps us do that.

A little acronym that can help us remember and reflect the values/priorities of the Kingdom of God and a heart of worship is J.O.Y.

**J**esus

**O**thers

**Y**ourself

In that order...this will help us counter the deification of Self. As the psalmist writes, “*Not to us, Lord, not to us but to Your name be the glory, because of Your love and faithfulness*” (Psalm 115:1)

- *How is worship an act of defiance?*
- *In what ways does our culture/society value the practical, the pragmatic, the utilitarian? In what ways has that leaked into the Church?*
- *How can beauty, art, and aesthetics enhance our worship of God?*
- *What are some ways we can worship outside of the walls of the church building on Sunday mornings that can both reflect the Kingdom of God and form us into a different kind of people?*

#### Chapter 35 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then True Worship Is About Relationships, Not Rituals

God desires...us. The question is, do we desire God? Or do we really just desire what we think God can provide for us that's out of our control to get for ourselves? Another way of asking this: Is God a means to an end or an end in Himself?

Acts of worship and forms of worship, ideally, are designed to cultivate a heart and life of worship, with the ultimate purpose being union with God...because that's what we were created for. As Jesus would say, a human apart from God is like a branch separated from a vine or tree. The only type of life we were designed to have is one in which we abide in God. (see John 15:1-17)

Going through religious rituals (attending services, prayer, singing, offerings, etc.) without a heart/desire for relationship WITH God is simply meaningless.

- *Describe your desire for God.*

- *How is worship a reflection of your relationship with God? (Please think about worship as more than just what we do together on Sunday mornings.) Or, to ask it another way, how does your relationship with God affect the various aspects of your life?*
- *Are there any reflections from last week's Scripture readings that you'd like to share?*

### Soul Training Exercise

- Read & Reflect on...
  - Deuteronomy 5:12-15
  - Luke 13:10-17
  - Mark 2:23-28
  - Matthew 11:28-30
  - Psalm 27:1-4
  - Psalm 50:7-15
  - Mark 14:3-9
  - Psalm 96:1-9
  - Isaiah 58:1-10
  - Revelation 21:3-7
  - Romans 12:14-21
  - Psalm 51:1-17
  - John 4:19-24
- “Waste” Some Time With Jesus
  - This week's invitation is to simply carve out some extra time to hang out with Jesus...beyond whatever regular time you spend with Him...with no particular agenda other than to enjoy one another's company. There is nothing to “accomplish” other than being together in conscious companionship.
  - Admittedly, “hanging out” with Someone you can't see takes some practice and is sort of an acquired taste, so to speak. If you find it odd, awkward, weird...that's OK. But remember, you were made for this, to commune with the God who loves you. Don't go into this with any expectations, just with an open heart and mind.
  - Afterwards, if you didn't feel, experience, or sense anything...that's OK. That doesn't mean you did it wrong or that there's anything wrong with you. Don't judge or evaluate the experience...just enjoy it...just be in it.