

21 March, 2021

SERMON 'Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath'

What is worship that is real and authentic?

We look at Jesus' teachings about this to learn how to honour God in worship.

The Bible describes perfect worship.

It occurs around the throne of God.

That is a place where there is no pain, or sadness; A place where no sun or moon are needed because God is there to provide light and warmth; A place where the chaos and all that disturbs is replaced by the perfect peace.

It is a place where there is no distinction made among people, nations and languages.

All are equals before the Almighty God and the Lamb, their Saviour.

But we aren't around the Throne of God yet.

We are here in this world where worship for us sometimes becomes problematic.

Oftentimes, we believe that worship is about things that we believe we need to do to please God.

Sometimes we think that worship is about us measuring up.

Sometimes we think that worship is about coming to church on Sunday in our best clothes.

Sometimes we get to thinking that worship is about singing the right things using the right melodies in order to earn God's favour.

And in their proper context, each of these things can certainly be part of what God-honouring worship is all about.

But worship is about much more than these.

Today we will deal with the issue of worship.

We deal with important questions such as:

What is worship?

What does true worship look like?

How can we worship God in a real and authentic way?

Let's begin by looking at what we can learn from the Gospel of Mark.

The first two verses in our Gospel text say:

23 Once on a day of worship Jesus was going through the grainfields.

As the disciples walked along, they began to pick the heads of grain.

24 The Pharisees asked him, "Look! Why are your disciples doing something that is not permitted on the day of worship?" (Mark 2.23-24)

It was a Sabbath day – the equivalent of our Sunday morning – the day of rest.

Jesus' disciples were engaged in activity that wasn't permitted by the religious rules and regulations of the time.

They were picking grain because they were hungry.

Now there were people who were seen as the enforcers of the religious laws.

Among them were the Pharisees and Scribes and those who ruled in the temple & they criticized Jesus because of what the disciples were doing.

You see, for these religious leaders – worship had become a series of does and don'ts.

The Sabbath was a day when certain activities were permitted and others weren't.

Pleasing God had been reduced to a formula.

God will be happy if you walk no more than 30 paces but He will be displeased if you walk 31.

God will honour your worship if you give your tithe but He will be angry if all you can bring is a widow's mite.

Honouring God had been reduced to rules and regulations.

But this type of worship had been rejected by God through the centuries.

Many years before the prophet Isaiah had told the people: "The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men." (Isaiah 29.13)

There is a story that involved the noted medieval poet, Dante.

Dante was deeply immersed in meditation during a church service.

Because of this, he failed to kneel at the appropriate moment during the worship service.

His enemies hurried to the bishop and demanded that Dante be punished for his sacrilege.

Dante defended himself by saying, "If those who accuse me had had their eyes and minds on God, as I had, they too would have failed to notice events around them,

and they most certainly would not have noticed what I was doing.” (Today in the Word, March 10, 1993)

You see, when worship becomes about rules and laws that have to be obeyed, it’s easy to take our eyes off God – the One to Whom we are rendering worship.

The focus changes to what we are doing and how we are doing it and whether those around us are doing it well.

We miss the boat and the point of worship when this happens.

Well, what is the contrast to this type of worship?

I think it begins by understanding who God/Jesus is, and who we are in comparison to Him.

We know that God/Jesus is almighty and all knowing.

He is the Creator through whose Word everything came to be.

As you consider these eternal qualities about God, doesn’t it become clear that worship is not about what we do for God?

Worship is all about what God does for us.

And that is the key to Jesus’ response to the religious leaders who criticized Him.

Jesus said to them: “Haven’t you ever read what David did when he and his men were in need and were hungry?

Haven’t you ever read how he went into the house of God when Abiatha was chief priest and ate the bread of the presence?

He had no right to eat those loaves.

Only the priests have that right.

Haven’t you ever read how he also gave some of it to his men?

Then he added, “The day of worship was made for people, not people for the day of worship.” (Mark 2.25-27)

You see, friends, the true worship of God begins in the heart.

David, king of Israel and one whom the scriptures call a man after God’s own heart learned this the hard way.

He had strayed. He had done abominable things and he was trying to cover it all up with a thin veneer of human righteousness.

But when God called him on his hypocrisy, David penned the words of Psalm 51. He wrote:

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51.16-17)

Worship is about recognizing our great need before God.

It is about approaching our Creator with a heart that is fully aware that our life depends wholly on God's grace and mercy.

It is about coming in humility before the One that is able to restore and heal and forgive.

Listen to this story that Jesus told about two people who came before God:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

But the tax collector stood at a distance.

He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18.10-14)

So, what happened with these two men?

Why was the one's worship and prayer acceptable to God and not the other? //

Well, it was a matter of the heart, wasn't it?

The Pharisee was all about what he was doing for God.

He was content and sure about his own ability.

In fact, his words seem to say that he didn't have much need for God at all.

He was able to do it all on his own.

But the tax collector recognized his depravity.

He was an abject sinner.

He knew that he didn't deserve God's mercy.

He recognized that he had nothing that he could offer to God.

His heart was humbled because he recognized his great need.

And so, he came with a broken heart before God.

He came to receive forgiveness from God.

His worship was recognized by God because it was marked by a complete dependence on God.

That is worship.

That is why Jesus said that the day of worship is made for man and not us for the day of worship (Sabbath.)

On the day of worship, we come to the place where forgiveness flows freely.

We come to a place where our confessed brokenness and sinfulness is changed by the Cross of Jesus into righteousness before God.

We come to a place where the Resurrected Saviour offers hope to – us sinners – where we are served by Jesus through his Word, where we are filled by God so that we can honour Him and glorify Him with our lives.

Franz Joseph Haydn, the renowned composer was present at the Vienna Music Hall.

His oratorio, The Creation, was being performed.

But he was an old man now.

He was weak and unable to move around easily, so the great composer was confined to a wheelchair.

As the majestic work he wrote moved along, the audience was caught up with tremendous emotion.

When the passage, "And there was light!" was reached, the chorus and orchestra burst forth in such power that the crowd could no longer restrain their enthusiasm.

The vast assembly rose in spontaneous applause.

But Haydn struggled to stand and motioned for silence.

With his frail hand, he pointed toward heaven, and he said, "No, no, not from me, but from thence comes all!"

Having given the glory and praise to the Creator, he fell back into his chair exhausted. (Daily Bread, September 20, 1992.)

Worship is about doing likewise with our lives, remembering the New Covenant which is based upon the love of Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath. Amen & Amen