



“What Are the Elements of Worship?”
(Exodus 20:4-6)

Introduction: You will recall that last week we saw in the Second Commandment that the Lord tells us how to worship Him, and that He takes His worship very seriously. In the Old Covenant, and in the New as well, we have examples of those who did not take God seriously at His Word. They did both what was forbidden by God and things which were not commanded by Him in worship and the results were devastating. When the people made a golden calf and worshiped it as God, the Lord ordered that many of them be destroyed. When Dathan, Korah, Abiram and On tried to intrude into the priestly office, when they were not called by God, they and everything which belonged to them were destroyed. When Nadab and Abihu offered to God strange fire, which He didn't command, fire came out from His altar and consumed them. When Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark so that it would not fall to the ground, the Lord struck him down. And when Ananias and Sapphira gave their offering to the Lord and lied to Him at the same time, He took both of their lives. This should be enough to teach us that we are not free to express ourselves in any way we wish when we worship God. He does not accept anything we might care to offer Him as worship. Rather, He has given us very specific guidelines which He expects us to follow, especially when it comes to the public worship of God, although we should not think that in private He will accept the things He will not accept in public. Of course the question might be raised, Why doesn't God judge more severely the churches which do seek to worship Him in ways He has not commanded? It may be that He shows more grace where there is more ignorance, or it may be that He is judging them for it by allowing them to fall into greater and greater ignorance, which in the end will result in greater judgment. The more that churches seek to please men in their worship rather than God, the more the Lord is giving them over to a man-centered pseudo worship which is not honoring to Him.

Since the Lord takes these things seriously, and since these things are also important to our spiritual well-being and growth in grace, we should want to take a closer look at what it is that God commands us to do in worship, so that we might honor Him in it and receive His blessing. Since this is a very large subject for one lecture, I will only deal with each of the elements briefly.

I. First, let's look at those elements which are a part of what we call the “ordinary” worship of God, or those things we do each week in worship.

- A. The first and primary means of worship is the reading, preaching and hearing of the Word of God.
 1. As I told you last week, all of life is worship to the Lord, so we should not find it surprising that the Lord would command first of all the one who would rule over His people to read His Word daily.
 - a. Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 17:18-19, “Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes.”
 - b. If a king is to lead his people in the ways of the Lord, so that they might experience His blessing, he needs to know what that way is. So the Lord commanded the king to read His Word daily that he might learn to fear the Lord by keeping the law.
 - c. Certainly this is the kind of man we should want to lead us as well. We should therefore pray that the Lord in His mercy would one day raise up such a man to lead us in this country.
 2. If reading God's Word was important to the king, we need to see that it was also important to the people as well. For how can a husband lead his wife, or parents lead their children, unless they are instructed and nurtured in the Word.
 - a. Moses writes earlier in the same book, “And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on

- your gates” (Deu. 6:6-9).
- b. The average family probably didn’t possess any scrolls of Scripture in those days. So the Word they possessed was memorized and then written down by them so that they would not forget to read it and talk about it. Thankfully, we have the Scriptures in book form, and they are readily available to all of us. Sadly, however, our generation has probably neglected the reading of the Scripture more than any other. We should therefore make the reading of the Word an integral part of our lives, so that we might know and do the will of God as households.
3. And of course, the reading of Scripture was also a part of Old and New Covenant worship.
 - a. James said in Acts 15:21, “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since *he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.*”
 - b. Paul said to the Jews at Pisidian Antioch, “For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor *the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him*” (Acts 13:27).
 - c. And with regard to New Covenant worship, John writes, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3). There are also several references in the NT letters that the letters of Paul be read at the assembly of the saints (Eph. 3:4; Col. 4:16; 1 Thes. 5:27).
 - d. It has been said that the reading of the Scriptures is the purest form of preaching, for in it we are not hearing merely the expositions of man, but the very words of God.
 4. The reading of the Word is important, but so is the preaching of the Word. The Lord realizes that a faithful exposition of His Word is necessary both because it tends to warm and move our hearts and because as our world changes the applications of His word become more varied.
 - a. Paul wrote to Timothy, “Preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2). This is to be a regular part of worship. A portion of Scripture is to be explained and applied. Preaching also differs from a lecture in that the exposition and application is done in the power of the Spirit and in the authority of Christ. Christ has appointed preaching in His church so that His people may hear His Word.
 - b. But preaching isn’t enough to profit anyone by itself. It must also be received by faith and practiced. James writes, “Therefore putting aside all filthiness and *all* that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:21-22).
 - c. If the preached word is not listened to, it’s because the heart is hardened by sin. Then the evil one comes and snatches it away so that it doesn’t produce any fruit (Matt. 13:19). The reason why the children of Israel were not able to enter into the Promised Land was that the word which was preached to them was not united in their hearts with faith, and as a result, they did not enter God’s rest.
 - d. But those who listen to it are blessed. The Lord says through Isaiah the prophet, “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isa. 66:2). The proper response to God’s Word is to yield obedience to His commands, embrace His promises, and tremble at His threatenings.
- B. The second element of ordinary worship is prayer.
1. Prayer is the offering up of our desires to God for the things which He has promised to give us in His Word, but it must be done in a certain way to be acceptable to Him.
 - a. First, we must be sure to offer it with thanksgiving. It shows in gratitude on our part if we pray to God and overlook thanking Him for the many prayers He has already answered and the many blessings He has already bestowed.
 - (i) Paul writes, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).
 - (ii) He says in Ephesians, “Always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus

Christ to God, even the Father” (5:20).

- b. Secondly, we need to offer it to the Father in the name of the Son. Jesus tells us in John 14:13, “And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do *it*.” Asking in Jesus name means that you are asking on the basis of His merits because you believe that it is agreeable to His will. We are not simply to tack His name on the end of our prayers thinking that it is the magic word to simply get what we want.
 - c. Thirdly, we need to ask in faith.
 - (i) James writes, “But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord” (1:6-7).
 - (ii) And Jesus says in Mark 11:24, “Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be *granted* you.”
 - (iii) How can we ask in faith? It is only when we ask according to His Word. We can only know that the Lord wants to ask for something when it is something He has told us to ask for and promised to give us in the Scripture. John writes, “And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”
 - d. And fourth, we need the help of God’s Spirit. Paul writes, “And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for *us* with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). We can do nothing spiritual without the help of the Spirit. Therefore we need His assistance even to do something as simple as pray.
2. There are a couple of other things we should bear in mind as we pray.
- a. First of all, we should not speak multiply words. Jesus warned us against vain repetitions. We won’t be heard for our much speaking.
 - b. But Solomon also warns us in Ecclesiastes, “Guard your steps as you go to the house of God, and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few” (5:1-2). It is very popular today to treat God as though He were on our level or even lower in prayer. We need to remember that He is high and holy and lifted up, while we, apart from a Mediator, have no right to come to Him at all.
 - c. A willingness to forgive others, as we saw in the communion service this morning is also very important. Jesus tells us that we should pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matt. 6:12-15). The Lord’s Prayer also reminds us that we should always put God’s glory first in our prayers, before we begin to ask for our personal needs.
 - d. We should devote ourselves to prayer, especially for the needs of the saints.
 - (i) Paul writes, “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of thanksgiving*” (Col. 4:2).
 - (ii) And he writes, “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18).
 - e. And lastly, we must remember the importance of personal piety when we pray. James writes, “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (5:16).
- C. The third element of ordinary worship is the singing of psalms and hymns of praise.
- 1. In the OT, we are exhorted again and again to praise the Lord with song. As well as in the NT. Paul writes, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and

admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16), and he says in Ephesians 5:19, “Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.”

2. This doesn't require much explanation, except to point out that as a denomination we don't believe that the Lord intends for us to sing psalms only, or to sing without instruments.
 - a. Some believe that the words “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” all refer to psalms, but others say they are different.
 - b. I told you last week during the Q & A time, that there are even examples of what are thought to be NT hymns in the Scripture.
 - c. I think Edwards is correct when he says that he could understand why the Lord would require us to worship Him under the shadows of the Old Covenant when we have the clearer light of the New.

- D. The fourth is the administration of the sacraments.
 1. Since we celebrated the Lord's Supper this morning and explained it then, there is really no need to go into it now any further than the fact that there are two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper.
 2. Baptism is to be administered only once to everyone who is included in the NT covenant community (Matt. 28:19), which is God's mark of ownership upon them, and the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated frequently, as we are told in Acts 2:42, “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” I believe that a strong case can be made that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis.

- E. Other elements of worship which we won't have time to examine this evening are giving and the benediction.
 1. The Lord tells us that giving is an act of worship, which may be why Ananias and Sapphira were so harshly judged for holding back part of the money they pledged to the Lord (Cf. Eph. 4:11,12; 1 Tim. 5:17,18; 1 Cor. 9:7-15).
 2. And certainly the benediction, which is the pronouncing the blessing of the Lord upon His people, is certainly a part of worship. Just as the Lord would have His ministers to proclaim His Word in His place, so He would have them place His blessing on them as well. We see this in both OT and NT.
 3. These six elements make up what we ordinarily do in a worship service on the Lord's Day.
 4. I would venture to say that the first three elements -- reading the Word, prayer, and the singing of psalms and hymns of praise -- also make up the whole of your family worship as well.
 5. These are the things which the Lord wants us to do to worship Him. It is really quite simple, much simpler than worship under the Old Covenant when there were so many elaborate rituals and ceremonies, all which prefigured Christ. But even though it is simpler, yet it is more spiritually effective in building us up in Christ than the OT worship. It is a much clearer and brighter light, and the Spirit works much more powerfully through the elements.

II. But besides the ordinary elements of worship, there are also those which are called extraordinary. I will only just mention these briefly.

- A. The first is religious oaths and vows.
 1. An oath and vow are very similar and are often hard to distinguish.
 - a. A person may take an oath that something is true, or that he will do something, calling upon God as witness.
 - b. A vow is something that someone makes when they want to show God or someone else the sincerity of their intent to do whatever it is they are vowing. You make vows when you get married, when you join the church, when you present your children for baptism, and when you receive a new pastor.
 - c. They are clearly acts of worship, because they are done in the presence of God as witness, therefore they are to be carried out.

2. Consider the following texts of Scripture.
 - a. Deuteronomy 6:13, “You shall fear *only* the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name.”
 - b. Nehemiah 10:28-29 Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes.”
 - c. Ecclesiastes 5:4-5, “When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”
 - d. Psalm 76:11, “Make vows to the LORD your God and fulfill *them*; let all who are around Him bring gifts to Him who is to be feared.”
- B. The second is fasting.
1. Fasting is abstaining from food, usually for a day, in order to seek the Lord for some special mercy. It includes deep humiliation for sin and is to be used during times of great need.
 2. The Lord says through Joel the prophet, “‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping, and mourning’” (Joel 2:12). Esther asked her uncle Mordecai, “Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish” (4:16).
 3. Jesus also shows us that it is still a part of NT piety as well. “And Jesus said to them, ‘The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast’” (Matt. 9:15). It is true that Jesus rose again and completed the disciples joy, but they would still continue on their pilgrimage through this world to heaven, which would mean that they would yet go through severe trial and need the mercies of the Lord which come through fasting.
- C. And the third element is special times of thanksgiving. (9)Ps. 107; Esther 9:22.
1. Whenever the Lord granted to His people extraordinary deliverances, the faithful would always set a day aside just for the purpose of thanksgiving. When the mercy they sought for in fasting was granted, they would return to the Lord their gratitude.
 2. The psalmist begins Psalm 107:1, “Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting,” and then goes on to describe what wonderful things the Lord did for him.
 3. The Jews in Persia also set aside two days of celebration which would be observed each year, “because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and *it was a month* which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions *of food* to one another and gifts to the poor.”
- D. Let me give you two concluding thoughts on the subject of worship.
1. Of course, everything which we do in worship is to be done in a holy way. “Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28). We will see more about this next week.
 2. Whenever we see false worship, we should be offended by it, oppose it, and do what we can to bring about a reformation of it.
 - a. Acts 17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols. 17 So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing *Gentiles*, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.

- b. Psalm 16:4 The sorrows of those who have bartered for another *god* will be multiplied; I shall not pour out their libations of blood, Nor shall I take their names upon my lips.
- c. Deuteronomy 7:5 "But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their *sacred* pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire.
- d. Isaiah 30:22 And you will defile your graven images, overlaid with silver, and your molten images plated with gold. You will scatter them as an impure thing; *and* say to them, "Be gone!"
- e. Certainly, anything which we do in worship which is not according to the Word of God should be reformed.