



2026 Weekly Devotions

Week of: May 18th - 24th

Sermon: May 17th



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
building community • equipping believers • serving Jesus

May 18

Deuteronomy 12:32

The inspiration behind this week's devotions is Exodus 30:9 which says, "you shall not offer unauthorized incense on it (the altar of incense), or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it." As I contemplated this verse, I did wonder if this instruction might offend the modern-day sensibilities of the church. After all, isn't the key to worship our hearts? What if the people desired to worship God in the ways that are expressly condemned?

Many of us have been raised to view worship as a creative experience. The idea is that God accepts whatever we do as long as it is from the heart. This concept might sound appealing but, as we see in texts like Exodus 30:9, it is patently unbiblical. To be clear, God DOES demand that we worship Him with all our heart, but He also expressly teaches what activities are allowed and what are disallowed in our worship. Stated succinctly, it doesn't matter if people genuinely want to worship in a biblically unauthorized way, God defines how we will worship Him and we must honor and live in accordance with His revealed will.

Over the years, theologians have coined a term for this idea calling this biblical concept the "regulative principle". The regulative principle simply says that our corporate worship (think Sunday morning gatherings) must be regulated, or informed, by express command of Scripture. The regulative principle says that we are responsible to do all that God commands of us in our gatherings AND we are limited in our worship to the methods and manners that God has ordained for His worship. Just as the Israelites could not offer unauthorized incense in their worship, we cannot offer unauthorized acts of devotion in our acts of adoration.

We see this principle in our passage for today. Notice that Deuteronomy has both a positive and a negative application. The Lord says that His people are to do "everything that I have commanded." In other words, we are not at liberty to disobey any command of the Lord. If God ordained and instructed that we worship Him in a specific way, we must do it! Conversely, God exhorts His followers not to add to His instructions. Just as the Pharisees were wrong to add to the moral law, so God's followers are wrong to add to the instructions of worship!

I suppose the point of the devotion today is straightforward, God calls the shots. He is in charge and He has given very clear directions in worship. This was true in the dispensation of the old covenant, and it remains true today considering the advent of Christ and the new covenant.

May 19

Exodus 20:4-5

If you read today's text before you read this devotion, you might be a bit surprised as to why I would choose this passage to talk about the regulative principle. Historically, the second commandment has been understood to forbid worship of idols. That is true, and I admit it is the main thrust of the passage, nevertheless, this commandment forbids the making of ANY image meant to reflect deity. This means that the second commandment doesn't just forbid idol worship of false gods, it also forbids the utilization of images that are meant to depict the true God as well.

This might be a place where the people would push back. After all, they lived in a very idolatrous world whereby every pagan nation (it seems) had images of their gods abounding. Why wouldn't it be ok for the Israelites to fit in? The answer is that God regulates how He is to be worshipped.

Second commandment violations remind us that God is spirit, therefore He cannot be replicated in an image, but the deeper implications of the second commandment drive at the very heart of our desire to picture God with all kinds of frivolous and inadequate means. Today, there are few Christians who would attempt to create an image of God out of wood or stone but there are many who would like to fashion Him into their own image or at least create a caricature of Him in their minds and worship that are invalid.

How does this happen? One answer is when we attempt to present a God to the world that suits our sensibilities. Just as the idol maker fashioned a false god to look like what he envisioned, so many Christians today paint a picture of God to suit their sensibilities by denying the portions of His revelation that either make them uncomfortable or offend their preconceived notions. When God is presented as immensely tolerant of sin He expressly condemns or when the Lord's attributes are not all detailed as revealed in Scripture, we are guilty of making a false god and presenting him in the place of the one true Lord of the universe.

God has clearly told us who He is. He has painted a picture for us of Himself in His revelation and our job is not to add to what He has said or take away what we consider to be His "rough edges", instead our responsibility before God is to honor and adore Him as He has chosen to reveal Himself. This is why corporate worship must be characterized by the proclamation of the full counsel of God. Will this challenge us? Absolutely! Will it require us to deal with topics that are not all that comfortable? Surely! Nevertheless, our responsibility before the Lord is to worship Him as He sees fit.

May 20

Matthew 15:9

When I entered the ministry, I assumed that there would be people who desired for me to shy away from certain biblical precepts. I knew that there would be people in the world who did not want to hear God's instructions about sexuality or idolatry for example. What I did not anticipate was the strong urge from individuals to say MORE than what the Bible teaches.

What I mean is that human nature loves to attempt to add to the Word of God. We like to try to make rules that are simply not found in Scripture. I believe there are numerous reasons for this phenomenon. One is that men are prone to self-righteousness. Mankind loves to attempt to earn the favor of the Lord but the only way this is possible is by erecting and "keeping" commandments that God has not given. We cannot keep the law as the Lord constructed it but we can try to keep rules we make! Another possible motivation for adding to the Word is security. Some folks are simply uncomfortable with the "gray areas". We like rules that tell us what is absolutely acceptable and what is fundamentally prohibited.

For instance, many folks are very leery of the lack of instruction in the Bible regarding alcohol. To be clear, God does provide some instruction here. He says that drunkenness is a sin. Nevertheless, there is a gray area here. How much is too much? When is it wrong to drink around others? How do I know if a "weaker brother" is present? What if I have a personal conviction not to drink?

The point is that there can be a myriad of reasons why believers might be tempted to add to what God has revealed in Scripture. These motivations might sound noble, but when we take our sensibilities or preconceived ideas about what is "holy" and teach them to the church we are, in fact, teaching the doctrines of men.

The regulative principle tells us that we must teach all the Bible (God commands it), but the Bible also reminds us that we are not to add to the Word of God either. It seems to me that we have a good category for theological liberalism (these are the folks who have decided that some of the Bible is outdated or just flat out wrong), but I do wonder if we have a category for unbiblical conservatism. The regulative principle reminds us that it is just as wrong to say "thus says the Lord..." when He has not spoken as it is to say that God has not spoken when He has! In short, we must be sure to proclaim ALL that God has said and we must be sure that ALL that we say is only what God has said.

May 21

Leviticus 10:1-3

How serious is God about all this regulative principle stuff? Perhaps I am making way too big of a deal out of this issue. I am afraid that some may read the biblical instructions on worship and consider them more of a suggestion than a hard and fast rule. If that is the case, I would remind you of the story of Nadab and Abihu which is recorded for us in Leviticus 10.

Recall the words of Exodus 30, God was clear that there was a category of “unauthorized” fire and now we see how seriously He takes that category. Evidently, Nadab and Abihu decided that they were free to worship the Lord in any way they chose. They neglected His commandments and suffered the consequences.

The Bible says that upon their act of rebellion, the Lord took their lives! This might sound extreme and, to be clear, this is not normative. The Bible is not teaching that every person who disobeys the Lord’s commandments will immediately pass away but don’t let that observation blunt the fact that the death of these two brothers demonstrates how seriously God takes His worship.

Some might conclude that because Nadab and Abihu are the exception there is no reason to be concerned. After all, they might reason, they are the only ones who died in this manner. If that is your temptation, be reminded that judgment comes after death for all of us! While Nadab and Abihu were ushered into judgment quickly, the fact remains that their story shows us that God is not going to approve of those who seek to worship Him in ways that are unauthorized.

When we gather this Sunday, I do not anticipate the Lord intervening in such a miraculous and dreadful way but that does not mean that He could not, nor does it mean that He is unconcerned. He has been clear to us just as he was clear to these brothers. We are not uncertain as to His expectations and we also should be aware that the brothers serve as warnings to all of us. God is a kind and benevolent being. He is so kind as to reveal to us His exact expectations regarding how we are to worship Him but do not confuse that kindness with impotence or lethargy. God is extremely passionate about the glory of His name, and He is just as clear about our responsibility to honor Him as He is about the grace He offers those who follow Him.

May 22

1 Timothy 4:13

The final three devotions will be dedicated to exploring what God has commanded for us. Today and tomorrow, we will examine Paul's instructions to Timothy in his role as pastor of the church in Ephesus. Before we go too far, it is important to note that Paul's instructions here clearly deal with corporate worship. We know this because of the little adjective "public" which is included in this exhortation.

Paul's instructions to Timothy are framed in the context of his pastoral ministry. We can safely infer from the overarching subject matter of the book and the specific terminology in this passage that Paul is talking to Timothy about corporate worship. Stated differently, this is a great passage to study when we are considering how God would regulate His public worship.

What does Paul exhort Timothy to do? The answer is clear, read the Bible. Our gatherings should have dedicated moments in which we read the Word of God. Frankly, I find this exceedingly obvious and basic, but it is disturbing how many public worship services I have attended that had very little of the Bible at all. I have heard "sermons" preached which never read the text. I have been in sanctuaries in which the Word of God was never opened and even in those places where the Bible might be briefly read, it is quite clear that fewer congregations are "devoted" to reading the Word than should be.

It seems to me that Christians sometimes are prone to apologize for simply reading the Bible publicly. The assumption seems to be that we will lose people if we read the text, but doesn't this betray something not so good about what we really believe? The Bible tells us that it is living and active (Hebrews 4), that it is the means of conversion (Romans 10), that it is profitable (1 Timothy 3) and the like. If we believe these things and cherish the Scriptures accordingly, then reading the Bible during public worship makes perfect sense.

Our desire is for Smyrna to be a place that is "devoted" to the public reading of God's Word. This is why we read selected passages prior to our sermons and then we read the passage, slowly and clearly, prior to jumping in. Sometimes this means reading an entire chapter before preaching! This might seem like "overkill" in the eyes of unbelievers but, when framed in terms of the Scriptures and how they regulate and inform worship, we can see that Bible reading is part and parcel of what our God expects of our public time together.

May 23

1 Timothy 4:13

You will notice that Paul's exhortation to Timothy is not limited to reading the text. The Apostle says that a faithful pastor will be devoted to the public reading and "teaching and preaching" of the Word of God. There is a distinction between preaching and teaching, but I do not believe it needs to be explored for our purposes today. Instead, we can speak rather generally and simply assert that there should be a dedicated time of instruction around the Word of God in our time of worship.

Our faith is predicated on God's revelation in Christ. Indeed, we are saved by the Gospel which means "good news". News stubbornly requires that it be articulated in order to be grasped! Over the years, there has been a continued assault on the idea of preaching or proclaiming the good news. Currently, there is a lively debate amongst supposed Christians around the place of authoritative instruction in our worship gatherings today. The "logic" is straightforward as many claim that people don't want to be talked to, they want to be conversed with. Consequently, there are some who would say the right path forward is to abandon public teaching and preaching and instead to encourage dialogues where everyone can contribute and have a voice.

This is absurd and it speaks to the larger issue of our day. Public worship is not ultimately about the comfort of the worshipper; public worship is about the glory of God. The question we should be asking is not "what do lost men desire of us?" but "what does our great and authoritative God require of us?"

The last sentence is true, but it is incomplete. The truth is that the public proclamation of the Word may not be what lost men desire, but it is the very thing that will bring them blessing precisely because they need to know the God of the Bible. When worship is centered around the revelation of God in His Word, He is glorified and the people are edified and we see this throughout history and in our church today.

Folks will sometimes ask what makes Smyrna unique. The answer is very straightforward, Smyrna is a place where the Bible is proclaimed and God, in His merciful faithfulness, is pleased to take our meager efforts to speak about Him and multiply them for His glory. We are not called to be creative, we are called to be faithful, and faithfulness looks like devotion to the public reading and preaching of God's Word at every corporate worship gathering.

May 24

Ephesians 5:19 & Colossians 3:16

As we conclude our week, let us turn our attention to the significance of singing in our time of worship. If you have attended Smyrna for any amount of time, you realize that our gatherings include a predictable mixture of a very few things. We pray, read the Bible, preach the Bible and sing. Why do we do this? The simple answer is because this is what God commands of us!

Singing is central to the life of the believer. In fact, there is great overlap between singing and God's Word as the biggest book in all the Bible (the book of Psalms) is actually a large collection of songs for God's people! God desires to be worshipped in music, and this is clear in His revelation of Himself.

Our two passages today both exhort believers to worship through song. You will notice that there are two audiences in view in both passages. First, both include an exhortation to address or admonish "one another". There is a sense in which singing corporately encourages the believer. I find this to be incredibly true week by week. There are few things I remember more about worship than our lifting our voices together. It encourages me to hear you sing. I am reminded that others believe the same thing, that we are united under the Lordship of Christ and, frankly, that I'm not alone. Your lifting your voice on Sunday is not just about your personal experience, instead you are contributing to an environment that has been designed by God to uplift your brother.

Second, you will notice that these songs are to be rendered to the Lord. Ultimately, we gather to make much of Jesus. He deserves our praise and He is honored and glorified as we sing about who He is and what He has done. God has wired us to sing. We sing as an overflow of what is happening in our souls and we sing to express the joy that exists deep in our souls.

Folks, singing is not something that is tertiary to our time together, instead we have come together, in part, to sing. Today, as you gather with the expectation that you will hear the Word read and preached recall that you are also gathering to sing to your Savior and He has ordained this activity for your good and His glory. What a joy and honor it is to know Christ and to be able to sing to Him in light of all that He has done to secure your salvation and bless you in a myriad of ways.

The simple take away from this week is clear, God cares how we worship. Just as the priests in the old covenant were not to offer unauthorized fire, so we are not to offer unauthorized modes of praise. Instead, our calling is to be faithful to the Lord in the ways He has ordained us to worship Him and to trust that in so doing, He will be honored and we will be blessed. May we worship with gladness and in faithful obedience on this Lord's Day.