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Lord's Day Morning
September 21, 2008
'Doctrines That Will Change Your Life' Series
#7

Which Way to Worship? Hebrews 9

Introduction

What are we to think when the highest calling we have on earth as Christians – the worship of God – is also one of the most divisive and controversial issues in the church? There are so many issues swirling around worship that no one is untouched. There is the matter of worship style. Will we have contemporary worship or traditional? Should we mix the two together in one service or have one of each? There is the matter of worship content. Is the focus to be preaching of the Word? Singing? Discussion? Drama? (There are some absurd things taking place in worship these days. Have you heard about the “pet blessing” services held by some churches?) Is participatory in nature or entertainment? And who is it for? Christians or non-Christians? For some worship means singing. For others all of life is worship. Others yet see it as what we do between the call to worship and the benediction. And what about an evening service? Is it optional or required? Is it worship or an informal gathering? There are a lot of questions about worship.

Now we won't take on every one of those questions this morning, what we do want to do is lay a foundation upon which the answers to these questions can come. If you are visiting with us today, we are in the middle of a series called

Doctrines that Will Change Your Life. What we are trying to do is look at different doctrines and ask the question, *So what? What difference does it make?*

What we are going to see today is simply that God's Word gives the blueprint for worship. The greatest joy and freedom in worship comes, not when we seek our own pleasures and desires, not when we design worship around what we want, but when we worship God the way He wants.

[Hebrews 9]

Is there any way to solve the worship wars? If we are to be guided by anything besides personal preference, we need a principle upon which we can stand. There are in fact two options, both with adherents.

1. If it's not forbidden, it's allowable.

One pastor called this the green light approach to worship. The idea is that man has freedom to pursue God in any manner that seems reasonable and honorable.

To be fair to this position, not all who hold this have thrown out their Bible. While it's easy to focus on the extremes – the animal blessings and circus acts that some call worship – there are lots of serious Christians who seek to obey what they know God commands concerning worship. They will sing and preach and seek God with earnestness.

What they have done is brought a basic biblical principle of life into the arena of worship. In life we teach that we are to live wisely. We are to obey what God has said and then walk by faith. There is a lot of latitude between one Christian and the next in terms of what he pursues, hobbies he develops, things he gives himself to, etc. Within the

guidelines of the Word, my desires, interests and preferences will dictate what I do.

If that principle is carried into worship the same outcome will result. Worship decisions will ultimately be reduced to someone or some group's likes and dislikes. Decisions for worship become, after a point, subjective. Sooner or later decisions will be made based on what we like or whether we think it will bring people in the front door or not. This green light approach assumes that beyond certain directives in the Bible, God is neutral.

2. Regulated Worship

This foundation for worship looks in a different direction to answer worship questions. It considers two things:

- What does God command? Whatever He commands we must do.
- If God doesn't command it, we should not do it. In other words, we don't have the same freedoms of preference in worship that we do in life.

Here's how the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it: *the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, . . ., or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.*

In our circles we call this the *regulative principle of worship*. The driving question becomes, not what do I like or prefer or want, but rather, *what does God want*.

So a valid question then is why? If life is not so strictly regulated, if I can make personal choices of preference in what I do and how I do it, why not in worship.

Three things to consider:

1. God is holy.

He is so different from us. He is perfect and righteous and majestic and glorious. The radiance of His glory is so bright that no man can even look at Him and live. But for His grace and mercy, He is unapproachable. We have no right on our own merit to enter into His presence. The Scriptures describes God as high and lifted up. God is not a man that we can negotiate our standing with Him. He owes us nothing. He is infinite and eternal. God says, *My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,*” declares the Lord. *“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.* How can we decide the best way to approach and worship such a God without His giving us explicit instructions?

2. We are so very sinful.

Although created in His image and created for His glory and to worship Him, we lost all standing with God in the fall. We have become corrupt from head to toe, from inside to the outside. There is nothing we can offer to God that He needs. He owes us nothing. How can a fallen, sinful person, whose mind is not whole, whose emotions and desires still battle selfishness and self-fulfillment – how can such beings determine how to best approach this holy, majestic God? How could we dare to determine the best way to worship Him?

3. The Pattern of Scripture.

All through the Bible there is a resounding message from God that He will tell us how to approach Him. Starting with Cain and Abel where God determined what offering or sacrifice was suitable; to Moses being warned to take off his shoes before he

approached God; to the Israelites being solemnly warned to stay off the Mountain of Fire where God's presence was; to Nadab and Abihu who were struck dead by God for their innovative worship style; to Uzzah who dared to touch the ark of the covenant. In all of these, was not the message clear? God was saying, *You will come to me on my terms, not yours.* Every detail of the temple; every priestly garment; every sacrifice; everything pertaining to worship was given by God.

And that brings us to Hebrews 9. This letter was written to converted Jews who were missing the good old days. They missed the outward glory and splendor of the temple. They missed the lampstands, the show bread, the altar and the incense. No longer did they see the animals and the bloody sacrifices. The veil was torn; the holy of holies had lost its significance.

What were they to make of it? In the New Covenant were they left to themselves to figure out worship? Not at all. Nothing had fundamentally changed. The New Testament didn't bring a grand change to our worship; it brought clarification and simplicity. All of the Old Testament pageantry and ceremony were pointing to one thing – Jesus Christ. In Christ they had been fulfilled.

All of our worship is to be centered on Christ. The point of Hebrews 9 is not that now we can do whatever we want; that somehow we are now qualified to determine how to worship; the point is that we are to continue doing only what He wants – only now with much more understanding and clarity. We see Jesus now as the apex of our worship.

So what difference does it make?

When we allow our worship to be regulated by God everything in worship will point our hearts to Jesus. God does not give us anything extraneous. Nothing distracting. Nothing that will lead us away from Christ. God has designed worship to engage our minds, our hearts, our emotions, and our wills.

Worship is not about emotionalism – that is, the goal of worship is not to make us feel good, it's not to whip up our emotions into an excited state of euphoria. The goal of worship is to engage our whole being. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

Is worship emotional? Yes! But that's different from emotionalism. Is emotion all there is to worship? No! Jesus said, *he who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me*. God has designed worship to stir our whole being by His grace and truth.

When our worship is regulated by God, we have confidence that what we do will lead us to Christ. When we follow the instructions of God to sing, to pray, to read and preach the Word, to participate in the sacraments – we know these will lead us to Jesus. And each of these will force us to do two things.

1. To give.

Worship is not a spectator activity. It is full participation. In music, we are called upon to sing, not listen to singing. We sing the Psalms because God has commanded us to sing them. And we've been commanded to sing nothing else. But why the Psalms? Because God gave them to us to lead us to Jesus. Jesus Himself said that the Psalms testify of Him. Nothing is more worthy of the praise of God than His inspired Words written for this very purpose. And we sing them a cappella because the Old Testament instruments in worship were symbols

of the coming of Christ. They were part of that ceremonial worship Hebrews 9 speaks of. The fullness has come, and we no longer need their aid to see Jesus.

When we pray, we all pray together. It's not a just a pastor or elder prayer. We are together petitioning the living God. Good worship involves the giving of your heart to Christ.

So think about how much you are giving in worship. When we sing, are you singing with joy and enthusiasm and thoughtfulness? During prayer, are you engaged in the praying?

2. To Receive.

We believe that when God's people gather to worship we are not alone. Present with us is the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. We worship in Spirit and in truth. So when the Word is read and preached and sung, we are ready to receive whatever the Spirit wants to give us. We believe that God is speaking. He may bring us conviction of sin. He may fill our hearts with thanksgiving. He may correct us in thought or action. He may instruct us in a way He wants us to go.

But when we worship we are ready to respond to God. Here am I, Lord. What would you have me do?

Worship is our highest calling and privilege. I want to challenge you and encourage you today to enter fully into worship. The source of your joy, your strength, your confidence, your peace comes from the presence of God. Jesus entered into the holy place of heaven to give His life so that you could be forgiven of your sin. Only by faith in Him can your conscience be cleansed. Only through Christ can worship make any sense to you. Have you trusted Jesus Christ and will you give yourself to his worship?