

Reformed Worship: A Theology of Worship

Lesson 4: We Meet With God

Intro

We've learned that worship is the most important thing we do all week and in all of life because it *shapes* us into the people we're created to be and because it fits and prepares us for our eternal destiny.

Now, the *reason* Christian worship shapes us into something for our restoration (instead of our ruin, as idolatry does) is because we actually, really and truly, meet with God in worship. In what may seem like a mundane church service, we're actually given the amazing opportunity to come before the living God. If it weren't for this, Christian worship would be not only meaningless, but a waste of time—especially when the world's watching the super bowl or climbing Mount Washington or chillin in their boats in Cape Cod Bay.

It's the fact that God is present in worship to meet with us that changes everything. Corporate worship becomes the greatest means of making us into the people we were meant to be—image bearers of God. We're reflective creatures who become like what we worship—and in Christian worship we worship God.

- I. Can't we meet with God anytime and anywhere we want?
 - A. The world is full of people, people claiming to be very spiritual, and even some claiming to be Christians, who believe they don't need to go to church to meet with God because they can meet with God in the great outdoors, on the top of a mountain, on a morning jog, and in any number of healing, meditative experiences. It sounds nice, but it's not true.
 - B. Of course God is omnipresent, Ps 139.7-10; Col 1.17. But God doesn't promise to meet with people everywhere. He doesn't take appointments any place we choose.
 1. If you run into your doctor at the grocery store, you don't expect an exam in the aisle. Instead, he'll tell you to make an appointment at his office—where and when he's decided to meet with his patients.
 2. Likewise, God doesn't meet with His people on a mountain top. He meets with them in worship at church. That's where He's *guaranteed* us He can be found. In worship we can know for *certain* that we'll meet with God and He'll be ready to bless us, Ex 25.8, 21-22
- II. How and where we meet with God
 - A. *How*. Heb 10.19-22. We meet with God as worshippers who come to Him through the person and work of Christ, Mt 11.27; Jn 14.6
 - B. *Where*. Heb 8.1-2. When we gather for corporate worship we're drawn by the Spirit into the heavenly places where we join with the heavenly host in the worship of God, Heb 12.18-24. Thus the worship we participate in every Lord's Day is heavenly worship.
 - C. If you want to meet with God, go to church and worship Him. Don't go on a hike. Don't go searching for some thrilling, moving, meditative, supernatural experience. God has promised to meet with you in extraordinary ways through ordinary means: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and corporate prayer and praise, WCF 25.3
- III. An important clarification
 - A. Of course we encounter God through other means like private prayer, group Bible study, and family worship. These are not to be minimized. Nor are they meaningless or insignificant. In fact, private and family worship are vital to one's spiritual life and relationships with God.
 - B. However, none of these can or is meant to replace corporate worship. In fact, it's what goes on in church on Sundays that *feeds and fuels* our private and family devotion throughout the week. Without corporate worship, these other means would die.
 - C. Moreover, even if God was pleased to commune with you in a really special way on top of a mountain, or in your prayer closet over a cup of coffee, it's an exception to the rule (and to His promises) and exceptions can limit the rule, but they can't annul it. Likewise, what God

was pleased to do extraordinarily *cannot* guide either your duty or your expectations. These can only be guided by God's precepts (Ex 20.8-11) and promises (Ex 25.22).

IV. Private pursuits of God

- A. It's worth asking those who seek to remove themselves from corporate worship for a more private experience of God: what's your desire? Is it to hear God speak? He speaks in the preaching of His Word. Is it to cultivate a space where you can better hear Him? The means of grace not only cultivate the space, but the heart, so you can hear Him.
- B. Even though private and family spiritual disciplines have their place in the Christian life, they're not the most special or most sacred place to meet with God. None of them can substitute for corporate worship because what God promises to do—and does—in His people in worship on His holy day, He doesn't promise to do—and doesn't do—anywhere else.

V. Public Worship is to be Preferred Before Private, Ps 87.2 (David Clarkson, 3.187).

- A. "Public worship is to be preferred before private. So it is by the Lord, so it should be by his people. So it was under the law, so it must be under the gospel."
 - 1. Three things are requisite that worship may be public: ordinances (preaching of the Word, Sacraments, and prayer), an assembly (more than a single family), and an officer (a minister of Word and Sacrament).
- B. The Arguments
 - 1. The Lord is more glorified by public worship than private. —God is glorified by us when we acknowledge that He is glorious; and He is most glorified when this acknowledgment is most public, Ps 96.1-3. The more there are who join together in praising, admiring, and worshipping God, the more He is glorified, and therefore more in public than in private.
 - 2. There is more of the Lord's presence in public worship than in private. —He is present with His people in the use of public ordinances in a more special manner, i.e., more effectually (Ex 20.24), constantly (Mt 28.20), intimately (Mt 18.20; Rev 1.13). Public ordinances are the sign, the pledge of God's presence; and in the use of them, he does in a special manner manifest Himself present.
 - a) Is not the Lord present with his servants when they worship him in private? Yes, but His presence is not manifest, nor ordinarily enjoyed, in private as much as in public. If the experience of any find it otherwise, and they find the sanctuary empty and the closet full of God's presence, then they have cause to fear the Lord is angry with them for their despising of public worship.
 - b) The presence of God, which, enjoyed in private, is but a stream, in public becomes a river, a river that makes glad the city of God.
 - 3. Here are the clearest manifestations of God. —Here are the clearest visions of the beauty, the glory, the power of God, that can be looked for, till we see Him face to face. David saw as much of God in secret as could then be expected, but he expected more in public; and, therefore, not satisfied with his private enjoyments, he breathes and longs after the public ordinances that he might have clearer discoveries of the Lord there, Ps 27.4
 - 4. There is more spiritual advantage to be got in the use of public ordinances than in private. —Whatever spiritual benefit is to be found in private duties, that, and much more, may be expected from public ordinances when duly improved. See Eph 4.11-15! These are the ends for which the Lord Jesus gave his church public officers and ordinances; and they will never fail of these ends if we fail not in the use of them. What more can be desired? Here doubts are best resolved, darkness scattered, and temptations most effectually vanquished. David had private helps as well as we, but how strangely did a temptation prevail against him, until he went into the sanctuary, Ps 73.16-17

5. Public worship is more edifying than private. —Live coals, if ye separate them, and lay them asunder, will quickly die; but while they are continued together, they serve to continue heating one another. We may quicken one another, while we join together in worshipping God; but deadness, coldness, or lukewarmness may seize upon the people of God if they forsake the assembling of themselves together.
6. Public ordinances are a better security against apostasy than private, and therefore to be preferred—an argument worthy our observation in these backsliding times. —He that neglects the public ordinances, whatever private means he enjoys, is in danger of apostasy. The rejecting of public ordinances is the great step to the woeful apostasies amongst us. Who is there that falls off from the truth and holiness of the gospel into licentious opinions and practices, that has not first fallen off from the public ordinances? Who is there in these times that has made shipwreck of faith and a good conscience, who has not first cast the public worship of God overboard? The sad issue of forsaking the public assemblies (undeniable in the apostasy of many former professors) should teach us this truth: that public ordinances are the great security against apostasy, a greater security than private duties, and therefore to be preferred.
7. Here the Lord works His greatest works; greater works than ordinarily He works by private means. —It is true, the Lord has not confined Himself to work these wonderful things only in public. Yet the public ministry is the only ordinary means whereby He works them. And since His greatest works are wrought ordinarily by public ordinances, and not in private, therefore we should value and esteem the public ordinances before private duties.
8. Public worship is the nearest resemblance of heaven and therefore to be preferred. —In heaven, so far as the Scripture describes it to us, there is nothing done in private, nothing in secret, all the worship of that glorious company is public, Heb 12.22-23
9. The examples of the most renowned servants of God, who have preferred public worship before private, is a sufficient argument. —David, who has this testimony, that he was a man after God's own heart, shows by his practice and testimony that this was God's own mind, Ps 84.1-2, 10
10. Public worship is the most available for the procuring of the greatest mercies, and preventing and removing the greatest judgments. —It is most effectual for the obtaining of public mercies, for diverting public calamities, and therefore to be preferred before private worship. This is the means the Lord prescribes for this end; and He encourages His people to the use thereof with promises of success, Joel 2.15-16
11. The precious blood of Christ is most interested in public worship, and that must needs be most valuable which has most interest in that which is of infinite value. —How valuable are those ordinances, which are the purchase of that precious blood, which are the gifts Christ reserved for the glory of his triumph! Eph 4.8, 11-12
12. The promises of God are more to public worship than to private, Ex 20.24

C. ***“But I*** find something different in my experience. I sometimes experience more of God's presence, more assistance of his Spirit, more joy, and more raised affections in private; whereas in public I often find much dullness of heart. So I can't agree that public is to be preferred over private.”

1. Experience is not a rule for your judgment, the word of God is. —That is a fallible guide, and this the only infallible. If you press your judgment always to follow your experience, Satan may quickly afford you such experiences as will lead you out of the way. Be scrupulous of following experience when it goes alone, not backed by the word, and not countenanced by Scripture. It has deceived many.

2. It may be your enjoyments in private were upon some special occasion. —Now some special cases make no general rule; nor are they sufficient to afford a universal conclusion.
3. These enjoyments of God in private may be extraordinary dispensations. —These the Lord does sometimes use, though seldom, though rarely. Now, such extraordinary cases are exceptions from the general rule, and such exceptions limit the rule, but they can't overthrow it. They take off something from the extent, but nothing from the truth of it.
4. It may be thy enjoyments in private are the fruits of thy attendance upon God in public. —The benefits of public ordinances are not all, nor always, received while you are therein employed. The fruit of them may be continued many days after.
5. There may be a deception in your experience. —All those joys, affections, enlargements, which men find in duties, are not always from the special presence of God. When men seem to be carried out with a full gale of assistance, it's not always the Spirit of God who fills the sails. Moreover, if your grand experiences in private duties lead you to despise public worship, then the evil spirit may be behind them. Because those assistances in private worship which come from the Spirit of God have a better tendency than to disparage the public worship of God, of which He Himself is so tender.
6. It may be the Lord seems to withdraw from you, and to deny you spiritual assistance in public worship as a test to try your love to Him and to the ways which most honour Him, to see whether you will withdraw from Him and His worship, when He seems to withhold Himself from you; to see whether you'll serve God for nothing but love.
7. You may actually enjoy more of God in public but not observe it. —It's not the enlargement of heart, flashes of joy, and stirrings of the affections, that argue most of God's presence. There may be much of these when there is little of God.
8. It is to be suspected that what you want of God's presence in public worship, is through your own fault. —Not because more of God is not to be enjoyed or more spiritual advantage is not to be gained in public ordinances, but because, through some sinful miscarriage, you make yourselves incapable of it. Examine your ways impartially and you'll find cause to accuse yourselves instead of objecting anything against the preeminence of public worship. There is so much self-love in us that we're apt to blame anything, even the worship of God itself, rather than ourselves—yes, even when we alone are to be charged and accused, Isa 59.1-2

D. What now?

1. *Don't* despise the public worship of God. *Don't* consider private means above it or even equal to it. *Don't* prefer the worship of self (with pleasure, indulgence, etc.) above it.
2. Rather...
 - a) Give public worship the glory due to it. Prefer it before private, in your thoughts, in your affections, and in your practice. Get higher thoughts of public ordinances and then get affections answerable to those apprehensions.
 - b) Get high thoughts of God and you will have high thoughts of worship, where He is.
 - c) Delight in the worship of God, Isa 58.13-14; Ps 122.1
 - d) Get spiritual hearts. A carnal, worldly, fleshly man cannot discern that which renders the public ordinances so highly valuable to the soul.
 - e) Look upon the public ordinances with the eye of faith. If you consult only with sense, you'll be apt to say with Naaman, What are the waters of Jordan more than the rivers of Damascus? What is there in public reading of the Word, more than reading it at home? What is there in public preaching, more than in any other good discourse?
 - f) Labor to draw out the virtue and efficacy of public ordinances to make the utmost improvements upon them. When you find the refreshing comforts and blessed advantages of public worship, you won't need many motives to give them their due honor and your due attendance.