



SESSION 1 — *The Importance of Private Worship*

- Pastor Keith -

In his book, *Worship: The Ultimate Priority*, John MacArthur writes (pp. 50-51),

A number of years ago I read a newspaper account of a christening party in a wealthy Boston suburb. The parents had opened their palatial home to friends and relatives, who had come to celebrate the wonderful event. As the party was moving along and the people were having a wonderful time eating and drinking and celebrating and enjoying one another, somebody said, "By the way, where is the baby?"

The heart of that mother jumped, and she instantly left the room and rushed into the master bedroom, where she had left the baby asleep in the middle of the massive bed. The baby was dead, smothered by the coats of the guests.

MacArthur goes on to make application to the corporate worship of the church, writing that, within His own Church, Christ “is often carelessly overlooked by those who are supposedly celebrating Him, and the result is spiritual catastrophe.”

Luke tells a story in his gospel (Luke 10:38-42), which evidences that such an application can be made, not only corporately/publicly, but individually/privately. The contrast between Mary and Martha stands as an ongoing testimony to the importance of never forsaking “the main thing” in our own personal piety. While Mary “welcomed [Jesus] into her house,” Martha “was distracted with much serving” and was soon criticizing the patient, unhurried worship of Mary. Jesus’ rebuke serves well to frame our consideration tonight.

Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.

Worship is important (Matthew 4:10; Psalm 95:6). God wants to be worshipped everywhere, by all people, at all times (Psalm 113; Malachi 1:11; 1 Timothy 2:8). In fact, He is seeking such worshippers (John 4:23b). Therefore, for the Christian, “Every hour is a worship service and every place, a sanctuary.”

In this Band of Brothers meeting, we will be discussing, not corporate worship, but personal/private worship—not Sunday worship, but Monday-Saturday worship.

THE DEFINITION OF WORSHIP

- 1. Worship observed** — (Job 1:20-22; John 20:28; Revelation 4:8, 11; 5:12-13)
- 2. Worship defined** — focusing on and responding to God
 - *Worship is all about God* (and what He wants/deserves), not us (cf. John 3:30; Isaiah 6).
 - *Worship is ascribing to God* (not giving, but acknowledging) *His worth* (Psalm 29:1-2; 96:7-9 [1 Chronicles 16:28-29]; Revelation 4:11; 5:12). — It comes from the Saxon word “worship.” It is multifaceted in its dimensions, as is evidenced by a plethora of Biblical words describing worship: “to fear, bow, honor, glorify, magnify, exalt, adore, sing, praise, thank, serve, give.”
 - *Worship necessitates thinking about God* (“meditate”).
 - *Worship is overflow* (Psalm 45:1). — The word “overflow” means “to boil over.” “Praise is the boiling over of a hot heart” (MacArthur, p. 43; cf. Luke 24:32).
 - *Worship is both a means and an end.* — As an *end*, it brings us into an encounter with God, which nothing else can surpass. As a *means*, it transforms our lives and empowers our mission.

THE PLACE OF PRIVATE WORSHIP

1. Public worship is prioritized.

- Congregational worship better reflects heavenly worship (Revelation 4-5; 19:10; 22:8-9).
- Congregational worship more widely glorifies God (Ephesians 3:10, 21).
- Congregational worship more broadly edifies people (1 Corinthians 12-14; 1 Peter 4:10-11).
 - You can be more edified (via the preaching, prayers, voices, and gifts of others).
 - You can be more edifying (to others when worshipping with them than by yourself).
- Congregational worship more richly enjoys the privilege of being God's temple (collective—1 Corinthians 3:9, 16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5 compared to individual—1 Corinthians 6:19). "We can expect the Lord to manifest His presence to us in congregational worship in ways unique to that much larger and more gloriously multifaceted temple" (Donald Whitney, *Give Praise to God*, pp. 291; cf. Matthew 18:20).

2. Private worship is important — Once-a-week worship cannot satisfy the longing of a believer who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart and soul and strength and mind" (Matthew 22:37-38; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27; Deuteronomy 6:5).

- Geoff Thomas — "There is no way that those who neglect secret worship can know communion with God in the public services of the Lord's Day."
- A. W. Tozer — "If you will not worship God seven days a week, you do not worship Him on one day a week."
- Matthew Henry — "Those cannot worship God aright who do not worship Him alone."

3. Public and private worship must be balanced.

- Some emphasize private worship too much. — This results in a spirituality that is mystical, esoteric, experiential, individualistic, and self-centered.
- Others emphasize private worship too little. — (1) Some are so blessed by congregational worship (i.e., the glorious singing, the stirring testimonies, the memorializing ordinances, the powerful preaching) that private worship seems trivial. (2) Some go to church religiously/habitually (which placates their conscience in regards to worshipping God), and they simply never think about private worship.

THE HISTORY OF PRIVATE WORSHIP

1. Jesus enjoyed private worship (Matthew 6:6; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; also public worship, Luke 4:16).

2. Biblical heroes enjoyed private worship.

- David — He regularly worshipped God privately in the fields as a shepherd (e.g., Psalm 5:3). No wonder, then, that he was "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).
- Sons of Korah — They were responsible for leading the public worship of Israel, and yet they stoked such public worship privately (Psalm 88:13).
- Daniel — Daniel 6:10
- Peter — Acts 10:9

3. Church history heroes enjoyed private worship.

- Martin Luther — "I still find it necessary every day to look for time during which I may pray."
- Lewis Bayly — "As soon as ever thou wakest in the morning, keep the door of thy heart fast shut, that no earthly thought may enter, before that God come in first; and let him, before all others, have the first place there. ... Begin, therefore, every day's work with God's word and prayer." → The challenge to

"keep the door of thy heart fast shut, that no earthly thought may enter, before that God come in first" could simply be the #1 application of this entire session!

- *Jonathan Edwards* — "Edward' whole ministry, as that of the Puritans, was based upon the conviction that the usefulness of a preacher's work is invariably related to the nature of his *inner life*. *Personal communion* with God must come first" (Iain Murray). "True religion disposes persons to be much alone, in solitary places, for holy meditation and prayer. ... True grace...delights in retirement, and secret converse with God."
- *George Müller* — "The first thing the child of God has to do morning by morning is to *obtain food for his inner man*. ... I dwell so particularly on this point because of the immense spiritual profit and refreshment I am conscious of having derived from it myself, and I affectionately and solemnly beseech all my fellow believers to ponder this matter."
- *Charles Spurgeon* — "The habit of regular morning and evening prayer is one which is indispensable to a believer's life." "My happiest moments are when I am worshipping God, really adoring the Lord Jesus Christ, and having fellowship with the ever-blessed Spirit. In that worship I forget the cares of the church and everything else. To me it is the nearest approach to what it will be in heaven."
- *Eric Liddell* — "He seemed to get his strength and self-discipline and his air of quiet serenity from his early-morning sessions of prayer, meditation and Bible study. He would come out from that and stride through the rest of the day as though the Sermon on the Mount was still ringing in his ears. *Whatever it was that he received in those morning sessions he spent the rest of the day giving out to others* [private worship and public worship/ministry go hand-in-hand]. ... Somewhere in this daily discipline of faith lay the secret of the man. ... He never deviated from the practice that had become his routine, of rising early and hallowing the 'Silent Hour' which shaped the rest of his day."
- *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones* — "To take time alone every day for the reading of Scripture and for prayer was foundational to his view of living as a Christian."

THE MOTIVATION FOR PRIVATE WORSHIP

OT believers could "focus on and respond to God," but NT believers can do it in a more special way (cf. Hebrews 11:39-40; John 4:23).

1. Because Jesus is our Mediator ...

- *Jesus brings God down to us* (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23; John 1:1, 14, 18; Hebrews 1:1-2). → If worship is focusing on and responding to God, we can do that to a greater degree now because we have seen the clearest revelation of God in Jesus (cf. 1 John 1:1-4).
- *Jesus brings us back to God* (on the cross—Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; 1 Timothy 2:5; 1 Peter 3:18; at the Father's side—Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). → We have been reconciled to God "once for all" and thus qualified to access the presence of God (i.e., He is our High Priest [cf. Hebrews 4:14-15; 10:19-21] and our righteousness [cf. Psalm 15; 24; 2 Corinthians 5:21]).
- *Jesus makes us able to worship*. Prior to our salvation, we were not worshippers, but enemies. Indeed, we would not actively worship God as He intended and as He deserves had not Christ reconciled us to Him (cf. yet, God would be worshipped—Philippians 2:9-11).
- *Jesus makes our worship acceptable*. All acceptable worship is offered through and purified by Him (Ephesians 3:12; 2:18; Hebrews 10:19 [still "by the blood," Hebrews 9:5]; 13:15; 1 Peter 2:5).

2. ... We are individually invited to confidently draw near to God ...

- *The OT highlights distance in worship* (the veil); *the NT invites closeness in worship* (the veil torn; Ephesians 2:18; Hebrews 4:16; 10:22).
- *The OT exudes fear in worship* (Exodus 19:18-19); *the NT enjoys fellowship in worship* (1 John 3:1-4).
- *The OT emphasized regulations in worship* (the Ceremonial Law); *the NT emphasizes a relationship in worship* (Philippians 3:3, 7-12).

- 3. Through the indwelling assurance of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19; Romans 8:15-16; Galatians 4:6).** — The indwelling Spirit gives us confidence of our restored relationship with God.

THE GUIDELINES FOR PRIVATE WORSHIP

How do we keep our private worship from being “in vain” (Matt. 15:9a)?

- 1. Private worship must be enabled by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:11; 12:3).** — True worship cannot be manufactured by man. It can only be produced and then instructed by the indwelling Spirit of God (cf. Romans 8:26-27).

- 2. Private worship must be motivated by love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).** — “Yet not for these reasons, but for love’s sake, we must seek God. For who he is, not for any advantage we may gain. ... Come for love of him” (John White, quoted in *Give Praise to God*, p. 296).

- 3. Private worship must be prioritized over personal service (Luke 10:38-42; John 12:2-8).**

- 4. Private worship must be practiced in both spirit and in truth (John 4:19-24).**

- *Worship in spirit* — This refers to the engaging of the heart and emotions (cf. Matthew 15:8b). It indicates that acceptable worship must arise internally (not merely externally), and be rendered with genuine sincerity (i.e., not simply restricted to religious rituals and locations).

- Examples — Paul in Romans 1:9; David in Psalm 45:1 and 51:15-17 and 103:1
- Stephen Charnock — “How can we imagine God can delight in the mere service of the body, any more than we can delight in converse with a carcass? Without the heart it is no worship; it is a stage play; an acting a part. ... If we lack sincerity, a statue upon a tomb, with eyes and hands lifted up, offers as good and true a service” (*Whitney, Give Praise to God*, p. 310). “We may be truly said to worship God, though we [lack] perfection; but we cannot be said to worship him, if we [lack] sincerity” (*MacArthur*, p. 156)

- *Worship in truth* — This refers to the engaging of the mind and thoughts. It indicates that acceptable worship must be directed by Scripture (cf. Matthew 15:9b; John 17:17) and focused on the Son (cf. John 4:22b, 25-26, 28-30, 42; Philippians 3:3).

Notice this balance, for example, in Psalm 47:7 and Colossians 3:16.

- 5. Private worship must be both an activity and a way of life.**

- *An activity*
 - Commanded — Psalm 100:2, 4
 - Practiced — Job 1:20-22; 1 Chronicles 29:10-14; Daniel 4:34-37; Luke 17:15-18
 - Applied — Like David, our testimony should be that “we will” (Psalm 86:12; 69:30) cultivate a habit of praising the Lord “at all times” (Psalm 34:1) and worshipping Him “every day” (Psalm 145:1-2).
- *A way of life*
 - It should subjectively describe us (Jonah 1:9).
 - It should objectively engage us (Romans 12:1-2; 1 Peter 1:2-5 and 2:5; Hebrews 12:28-29).

- 6. Private worship must express reverential awe of God (Heb. 12:28-29).**

- Worship is both a means and an end. With this point, we are focusing on the end.
- The infinite greatness and goodness of God, the realness of my meeting with Him, and my own personal unworthiness ought to provoke a holy and humble and sober-minded response unrivaled in life. Private worship should refresh our vision of who God is, what He is like, what He does, reminding and impressing us in fresh ways that He is “high and lifted up” (Isaiah 6). Donald Whitney writes (*Give Praise to God*, p. 294):

This is meeting with God. This is the greatest encounter possible. This is the soul’s coming home to God and feasting on the banquet of God himself. In private worship God reveals himself through his Word, shining divine light upon

the divine book so that we might find our minds instructed by God, our decisions guided by God, our hearts encouraged by God, our sins confronted by God, our hopes refreshed by God, and our spiritual hungers satisfied by God. Here we can delight in God, sing to God, weep to God, pour out our thoughts to God, confess our sins to God, and feel the worth of God. When alone with God, we can rejoice in his forgiveness, revel in his goodness, thank him for His blessings, and bask in His love.

7. Private worship must be prefaced by confession of sin (Psalm 24:3-4; 51:15-17; 66:18).

8. Private worship must result in obedience.

- Worship is also a means. It “has the effect of keeping us in close orbit to the heart and mind of God throughout the day” (Whitney, *Give Praise to God*, p. 294). True private worship cultivates within us obedience in several areas:

- Confession of sin — Isaiah 6:1-7
- Affection for God — This is the “greater fire” that will squelch smaller fires. This is what Piper means by “fighting fire with fire,” for example, in our battle against sexual lust (see *Sex Is Not the Problem [Lust Is]*). Donald Whitney explains (*Give Praise to God*, p. 294):

Meeting God in personal worship has the effect of keeping us in close orbit to the heart and mind of God throughout the day. The imprint of his words on our thoughts and the heartprint of his presence upon our souls stoke the fires of our affection for God and the things of God so that they burn long after the meeting of the morning. Without the habit of coming to the Lord in the intimacy of private worship, however, a spiritual frost forms on our hearts, and our minds are more easily distracted from the things of God. And when this spiritual distraction sets in, the world, the flesh, and the devil usually empower it and develop it into temptation of various kinds. Then it is so much easier for one or

more of these temptations to become a preoccupation as we glance less and less at God himself. Our bodies may remain in the public worship of God, our combined voices may mouth words to or about God, but our spiritual passion and vision may decrease even though surrounded by the light of God.

- Godly character — John White writes (quoted in *Give Praise to God*, p. 295), “Since we are influenced by the people with whom we associate, it follows that if we spend time daily in the company of our Creator God, a profound impact will be made on our existence” (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18).
- Eternal perspective — Again, White says,

To commune with God is to touch both infinity and eternity ... In prayer we are invited to private tutorials with the Fountain of infinite wisdom, to a daily audience with the Author of history, to fellowship and communion with the Source of all holiness and love. There is no charge for such privileges. ... The glories of heaven are ours for the taking. The wisdom of the ages is proffered free. We are bidden to bring our empty hearts to have them filled from cataracts of healing and love. What then is the value of meeting regularly with God? We will escape the pettiness of the earth-bound; we will commune with ultimate wisdom, infinity and love.

CONCLUSION

In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney encourages us to be passionate, diligent, and aggressive in our practice of private worship. He writes (p. 94),

Think of it: The Lord Jesus Christ is willing to meet with you privately for as long as you want, and He is willing—even eager—to meet with you every day! Suppose you had been one of the thousands who followed Jesus around for much of the last three years of His earthly life. Can you imagine how excited you would have been if

one of His disciples said, “The Master wants us to tell you that He is willing to get alone with you whenever you’re willing, and for as much time as you want to spend, and He’ll be expecting you most every day”? What a privilege! Who would have complained about this expectation? Well, that marvelous privilege and expectation is always yours. Exercise this privilege and fulfill this expectation for the glory and enjoyment of God forever.

Someone has noted regarding the modern man, “He worships his work, works at his play, and plays at his worship.” In defiance of that, will you echo David’s prayer in Psalm 86:11, “Teach me Your way, O Lord, that I may walk in Your truth; unite my heart to fear Your name.”

Read MacArthur, pp. 153-154 to help explain the direction of the next two sessions

RESOURCES

Donald Whitney, chapter 12, “Private Worship” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, edited by Philip Ryken, Derek Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003).

Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

Jerry Bridges, *The Joy of Fearing God* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 1997).

John MacArthur, *Worship: The Ultimate Priority* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2012).