

MAKING WORSHIP REAL - PART III

“Sanctuary Of The Soul”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

(I Kings 19:11,12)

This morning we come to the half-way point in the current series of sermons on Making Worship Real. Before going further, let's pause for a moment of review.

In the first message, To Father's House We Go, we dealt with the need for proper preparation if we are to get the most out of these weekly encounters with God.

We live nervously these days. The tempo of life is set at a terrific pace. There are few among us who have not, at some time or other, longed to get away from the loud noises and discordant sounds of the city, into the healing balm of a moment of solitude and silence.

The finer things of life grow slowly.

A rose does not mature in a moment.

Great works of art are not produced overnight.

Profound thoughts are not developed in a rush.

And great souls are not created in the midst of a world of ceaseless activity. There must be those moments of quiet when one can “tidy up his mind,” untangle the knots, and draw together the loose ends of life.

It is the same in our worship with God. You are, indeed, the exception rather than the rule, if you can instantaneously cease all secular activity and temporal concern and enter immediately into communion with God.

They say it's wise to count from one to ten when you're angry. It provides time to gain a new perspective and sometimes keeps you out of trouble. Even so, it is wise to make good use of The

Period of Preparation for it provides a moment in which you can make the transition from time to eternity, from earthly to celestial things.

When the Psalmist said, “Be still and know that I am God,” he was reminding us that we need to approach God with an unhurried calm. And when we come to Him in that attitude, we find we are no longer searching *for* Him, but rather are being found *by* Him.

Georgia Harkness, a prolific poetess whose works have brought untold blessing to uncounted hearts, has put it this way:

“Be still and know
That God is in His world,
Though clouds shut out the light,
Though ghoulisish specters stalk,
And all is night.

“Be still and know
That God is in His world,
Though mammon clamors loud,
And Mars lifts flashing steel,
Untamed and proud.

“Be still and know
That God is in His world,
Though men with reckless waste
May seek they know not what
In feverish haste.

“Be still and know

That God is in His world.
God speaks, but none may hear
That voice except he have
A listening ear.”

The purpose of The Period of Preparation is to help tune your ear to the proper frequency so, by eliminating the static of everyday strife, you may receive the message God has beamed your way.

Last Sunday's sermon dealt with the need of giving God our adoration. It sought to point out the fact that along with our prayers of thanksgiving must come our expressions of praise. For, as the title phrased it, there are times When Thanksgiving Is Not Enough. There are times when we must praise God, not for what He has done, but simply for what He is The Lord God of Sabboath.

We come now to the third message in this series entitled --**The Sanctuary Of The Soul**.

This sermon is built around The Period of Introspection and Confession.

Out of adoration comes a dual awareness of how holy God is and how unholy we are. As a result of seeing our sin in its true light, the light of God's holiness, we find an urgent longing to rid our heart of sin's pollution through the act of confession. And the scripture promises that, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9). Thus, adoration leads to introspection and confession, even as it does in our new order of worship.

Now, the really important part of this period is the Sacrament Of Silence. A segment of time when we can be alone with God amidst the multitude which surrounds us.

We do not need to search the scriptures very long to discover the true reality of God's presence is not found in the violent, the loud and the boisterous. It is found in quietness. Noise is a product of earth, but God is still, even as nature is still.

Charles Henson Towne phrased it this way:

“I do not need to shout my faith,
Thrice eloquent are quiet trees
And the green, listening sod;
Hushed are the stars,
Whose power is never spent;
The hills are mute;
Yet how they speak of God!”

When Elijah was weary of bone and broken in spirit, and God wanted to bring refreshing to his soul, He called upon Elijah to stand on the mountain top where he could see His glory.

“And behold, the Lord passed a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord: but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice” (I Kings 19:11,12).

That still, small voice was the voice of God. He always speaks to us in quietness. The rest of the time the din of the world, the clamor of commerce, the shouts of business drown Him out. It is not strange, then, that it is often in the stillness of the night God talks to His children. It is only then He can be heard.

We live in an age when talk has been deified as a means of solving all problems. When a difficulty arises, we may say, “Let's get together and talk it over.” Or, “Come on, now, let's talk it out.” But St. Paul said, “Faith cometh by hearing.” That's why you have often heard me say: “No prayer is truly a prayer at all, unless half the time is spent in listening.”

On many occasions, we read that Jesus withdrew from the business of living to commune with

God. Very little of what He said to God is recorded, but judging from the way in which He returned from these encounters with power to triumph over every test of life, it is pretty evident God said plenty to Him! And, that He was wise enough to listen.

We must share His wisdom if we are to live triumphant lives. In meditation, the ear is far more important than the tongue. And yet, far too many people make the same mistake with God they make with their friends: they do all the talking!

As someone has said:

“Prayer is not a monologue. It is a dialogue. It is not a one way street. It is a boulevard.”

And that should be your experience during The Sacrament Of Silence.

When this period in our worship experience comes, “*Don't just do something—sit there!*” Let it be a time when you put on the crepe soles and rubber heels of inner solitude and listen with a breathless hush as you hear the voice of God and learn the mastery of quietness.

Let it be a time when you say with Bishop John Oxenham

“Mid all the traffic of the ways,
Turmoil without, within,
Make in my heart a quiet place,
And come and dwell therein:

“A little shrine of quietness,
All sacred to thyself,
Where thou shalt all my soul possess,
And I may find myself.”

What will be the result of building such a sanctuary of the soul? What blessings will be yours as a

result of holding the world at bay for this brief period? What dividends will accrue to your account as a result of celebrating The Sacrament Of Silence?

A New Perspective

The first will be a new perspective, for meditation will cure you of the habit of self-deception.

We mortals are so constructed as to be especially susceptible to the fatal disease of false pride. It seems that talk is one of the major contributing factors in this malady.

Our friends dupe us with their flattery. And we are so willing to be duped. Even much of our inner conversation with ourselves is made up of self-justification. We are so like Little Jack Horner who stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plumb and said, “What a good boy am I!”

Yes, we can talk up a pretty good argument to support our contention that we are really not so bad and that our few “shortcomings” should be excused because, well, we were driven to it by our environment, or because we didn't get the right breaks, or some other equally foolish rationalization. But, the silence meditation demands, will quickly cure us of this disease.

Criticism of others which, in the parlance of psychology, is known as justification by condemnation—we justify our own weaknesses by condemning the weaknesses of others—criticism of others is replaced by self-criticism. And, if given reign, this self-criticism will lead us to pray the prayer of confession which inevitably results in the cleansing of forgiveness.

Let me show you what I mean. Several years ago, Lucille and I were holding a crusade in The First Baptist Church of El Cajon. During the visitation portion of our two weeks there, my calling partner, a layman from the church, and I visited a fellow by the name of Jim. During the course of our call he readily admitted he needed a Savior and he believed Jesus could save him. However, he was having an extremely difficult time in actually making the decision to receive Jesus as his Savior.

Finally, I handed him my pen together with a decision card, asked him if he would sign it as an indication of his willingness to receive Jesus as his Savior and then I stopped talking. The silence was overwhelming. He looked at me. I looked at the floor. I looked at him. He looked at the ceiling. It seemed like an eternity went by until finally, with a liberating sigh, he put the pen to paper and signed his name.

He was baptized the following Sunday evening. When the service was over, I took him aside and said, “Jim, what were you thinking during that period of silence before you made your decision for Christ?” “Do you really want to know?” he asked. “Yes,” I said. “Well, to begin with, I was thinking ‘How can I get rid of this fellow.’ And then all kinds of strange thoughts came to mind. I remembered a time during the war when, in a fox hole, I promised God that if He brought me through this safely I would give my heart to Him. I realized I had not kept that promise. I remembered the time I told my Mother I would become a Christian. And I realized I had not kept that promise. John,” he said, “I could argue with you. But when you stopped talking and I had to listen to the voice of silence, I could not argue with God.”

Silence is the language of eternity. It knows no barriers of dialect or creed. It bores right through the shell of sham and hypocrisy. It shows us up for what we really are. It cures of us the habit of self-deception by giving us a new perspective which, if followed long enough, will lead us to confession and forgiveness of sin.

A New Power

A second dividend on silence is new power, for it puts us in contact with new sources of spiritual energy.

No one has enough knowledge and power to carry him through all the trials and difficulties of living. We may think we have, and we may be very generous with our advice to others, but when it comes to living off our own intellectual and spiritual fat, we discover to our chagrin we are

weighed and found wanting.

As I said two weeks ago, “*Even a Stradivarius needs tuning.*” And the more it is played, the more it must be tuned! The farther an airplane flies, the more it needs to be serviced. The greater our activity, the greater our need of spiritual refueling. And when our spiritual battery runs down, we cannot charge it by ourself, but rather we must draw upon that inexhaustible reservoir of energy which flows through the pipeline of eternity by turning on the tap of silence.

There is not one of us here this morning who is not called upon at times to bear burdens which seem more than we can handle. But, likewise, there is not one of us here this morning who does not have, through Christ, access to the Source of power through worship and meditation. Power which will propel us over the most imposing impediment.

A soldier boy, who had known this refreshing and refilling of the power of God through many harrowing experiences in the War, wrote a little chorus which was a challenge and affirmation all in one:

“Got any rivers you think are uncrossable?
Got any mountains you can't tunnel through?
God specializes in things thought impossible
And He will do what no other one can do.”

How do we get that power? By daily celebrating The Sacrament Of Silence.

And then, silence will add this further dividend. Not only a new perspective and a new power but

A New Peace.

I suppose that's what we really need. Peace. Peace with God. Peace with others. Peace with ourselves. Most of us think we want money, or fame, or applause, or social esteem because we live in a world where these things count for so much.

But, the truth is we do not really want them because we do not really need them. Our real need goes much deeper. What we need most of all is peace.

Internal harmony.

Restfulness of spirit.

Equilibrium of soul.

And all of this Christ promises for He has said, “Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt.11:28).

But these precious possessions shall never be ours as long as we struggle on through the wastelands of ceaseless activity.

As long as we are never quiet enough to hear the still, small voice...

As long as we are never at home in our souls long enough to hear the gentle tapping of that Divine Guest upon the door...

As long as we lavish praise upon the strenuous life and shy away from the meditative life which produces high thoughts and deep emotions...

As long as we are afraid of silence, we will never know the “healing, sanative delights of solitude.”

So when the Sacrament Of Silence comes in our service, don't just do something—sit there! Learn to be at peace with yourself and with your God. And, as you do, life will take on new meaning. There will be peace for today and hope for tomorrow.

There is a story of a minister who pastored a downtown church and, because of its location, a number of people had the habit of visiting the church during the lunch hour to spend a few moments in quiet meditation. The pastor arranged his schedule to be in the sanctuary during the lunch hour so he could be available to anyone who might be in need.

He noticed one of his laymen came in every day. He didn't stay long. He would slip quietly into a back pew, bow his head for a few moments, stand, square his shoulders and leave. It was always

the same way. The man was never in church more than a moment or two, but even so, he came in every day without fail.

One day he did not appear. The pastor was mystified, but passed it off as being due to the man's busy schedule. However, when he failed to appear the next day and the next, out of concern the pastor called his home and learned from his wife that three days earlier he had been taken to the hospital with a serious illness.

The pastor called the hospital and, in the course of his conversation he said, “Jim, I hope you won't be embarrassed by my question, but I have been curious. What do you do when you come into our church every noon for so brief a time? You're not there long enough to pray.”

Jim smiled and said, “Pastor, you know something of my busy schedule; the pressure of our office is terrific. I find it impossible to take even a half-hour for lunch. But a couple of years ago I heard you preach a sermon pointing up the need for a time alone with God every day. Ever since, I have made it a habit on my way back from lunch to pause, even for a moment, in our church. When I take my place, I pray ‘Jesus, it's Jim!’”

The pastor was touched by the simplicity of the man's faith and went on his way. Several weeks later, early in the morning, he received a call from the man's wife saying the doctor had just informed her that Jim had only a short time to live. Would the pastor kindly call on him?

The minister left his home on one of those errands no pastor enjoys, but does because it's his job. As he entered the hospital room, the man looked up and smiled. The pastor said, “Jim, I'm here on a difficult mission. Your wife has asked me to tell you the doctor has just informed her you have only a short time to live.”

The man took the pastor's hand and said, “Yes, sir, I know.” “How did you know, Jim? Has the doctor been here before I came? Did he tell you?”

Jim smiled and said, “No, Sir, the doctor hasn't been here. This morning, when I awoke, I saw the form of One standing at the foot of my bed. His face was indescribably beautiful. And, as I watched Him, He smiled and said, ‘Jim, it's Jesus.’”

That's it, isn't it? “Jesus, it's Jim.” “Jim, it's Jesus!” For the man who has been on friendly speaking terms with God...

who has learned the discipline of daily meditation...

who has enriched his life through a regular celebration of The Sacrament Of Silence...

for *that* man, there is always the prospect of eternity in heaven with the Friend he has come to know so well on earth.

“And, as the Lord passed by, there was a great and mighty wind which shook the mountain...but God was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire...a still, small voice.”

Have you heard it speak to you?