

The Blessed Inconvenience of Worship

Years ago, before I got into the habit of attending worship services, I read a poem by Emily Dickinson that made an impression on me.

Some keep the Sabbath going to church;
I keep it staying at home,
With a bobolink for a chorister,
And an orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice;
I just wear my wings,
And instead of tolling the bell for church,
Our little sexton sings.

God preaches—a noted clergyman—
And the sermon is never long;
So instead of going to heaven at last,
I'm going all along!

I still think of this poem occasionally, when I am standing at the back at the beginning of services, looking out the glass doors waiting to usher in folks who are running a little behind schedule. It's hard not to get mentally distracted from the worship that is going on inside the auditorium. I get drawn away by the sandhill cranes striding through the grass in their majestic way, by the mockingbirds calling out their territory from the oak trees, by the white puffy clouds sailing through the bright blue morning sky.

One might be tempted to think of that little outdoor reverie as worship in its own right. Nature hasn't paused to observe the Lord's Day, so why should I? There is, as the popularity of Dickinson's poem shows, a certain pleasant worldly wisdom to that. I'm still a good person even though I don't go to church, aren't I? I can still trust God and speak to God, even if I'm not sitting in a pew, can't I?

But worship is required by God. It is the peak of presumptuousness for man to decide that he can get along just fine without worship.

First, God **demands that we worship** Him because He is God. He expects it as His due. In reverent fear, we must come and bow before His awesome majesty. Even from ancient days, God chose a place, "to establish His name there" (Deut. 12:5; 26:10), a physical location where the appurtenances of

worship could be set up and used; “and there you shall come.” “Come let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker” (Psalm 95:6).

Thankfully, we New Testament Christians do not need a specific physical location for worship—it can be in a rented room one week, an open field the next week, a member’s home the next week. Our temple is the church body, and as long as “two or three are gathered in my name” (Matt. 18:20) for worship, we have entered His presence. But we must never lose the attitude of humbly answering the call to come and assemble with the other local saints to present our offering.

To put it another way, those who tell themselves that they do not need corporate worship are disobeying God, and are inviting harsh judgment. If it’s the Lord’s Day and you aren’t assembling (Heb. 10:24) and bringing to God the offering of your lips (Heb. 13:15) then you are aren’t honoring God as *He* demands.

The example of the church under the direction of the Apostles includes coming together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7) to engage in singing (Eph. 5:19–20, Col. 3:16), praying (James 5:16), the pursuit of Scripture (Acts 2:42, 20:7, 1 Tim. 4:13), partaking of the Lord’s supper (Matt. 26:26–28, 1 Cor. 10:16–17, 1 Cor. 11:17–34), and giving an offering of money (1 Cor. 16:1–2, 2 Cor. 9:7). One cannot do that simply by taking a Sunday drive or, like Dickinson, relaxing in the garden. There are components of worship that cannot be experienced by swinging in a hammock. Worship isn’t just about taking a break from the grind, even with one’s family—it is about expressing to God praise and thanksgiving. Not even when that time is spent in vaguely religious activities. Someone may well say, “I was reading my Bible while rocking the hammock” but that’s not presenting oneself before God for worship. Someone may well say, “I watch the church programs every Sunday morning” but the same inadequacy applies. One local church recently cancelled a Sunday service, encouraging the members instead to help the elderly and feed the homeless and “*be* the church instead of coming to church.” That was a nice sentiment, but it is still a presumptuous violation of God’s commandments (such good work can be done outside the worship hour). Obviously, if we are sick or waylaid that’s another matter. But to the best of our efforts we worship God because He tells us to. We have an appointment to keep!

Second, **God deserves our worship**. His great love and provision motivates us. In 1 Chronicles 16, David commissioned a psalm of thanksgiving, which says,

Oh, give thanks to the Lord, call upon His name;
Make known His deeds among the peoples.
Sing to Him, sing praises to Him;
Speak of all His wonders.
Glory in His holy name;
Let the heart of those who seek the Lord be glad...
Tell of His glory among the nations,
His wonderful deeds among all the people.
For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.

We should not just feel like we *have* to come to worship, but look forward to it. “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?” (Psalm 42:1–2).

Third, **God governs our worship**. He tells us how to do it. God doesn't automatically accept every blundering attempt to worship Him. “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). It is possible to compare God to a doting father who receives his children's loving gifts with joy, whether they be clumsy first-grade art projects, or a handful of wildflowers and weeds picked on Father's Day. But that is only half the story. God is also holy and majestic, and has revealed certain standards by which He must be worshipped, lest the worshipper be rejected. He rejected worshipers who had failed to prepare themselves, or who had disqualified themselves due to uncleanness or sin. He rejected Cain because of his attitude. He rejected Nadab and Abihu because of their carelessness with one small detail of their offering. We should pay attention to the directions!

Fourth, **God provides worship** for our benefit. Worship is not ultimately for God. He doesn't need food from our hands and He can live without out attention (Acts 17:25, Isaiah 66:1–2, etc.) Worship is actually good for us! It elevates our minds. It restores our spirit. It recharges our batteries. It engages our minds. It reconnects us with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

God requires a time for worship because He knows we need worship time!
Thus, let us strive to have this attitude: “I was glad when they said to me, let
us go to the house of the Lord” (Psalm 122:1).

—*John Guzzetta*