**Worship** 10/12/23dkm

Read: John 4:1-26, 1Thessalonians 5

Text: 1Thessalonians 5:16-22

Psalms: 100old, 139:17-24, 141:1-4, 118:17-24, 72old

All of life is worship. This was popular teaching some years ago, and it is true. We are to present our bodies a ‘living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is you reasonable service’ (Rom 12:1) - the word ‘service’ is translated ‘worship’ in the NIV. This teaching was popular because it downplayed the importance of public worship. But public worship, or assembling ourselves together, is commanded in the Bible (Heb 10:45).

The Jews were commanded to make sacrifices in the temple, not at home. They met together in the local synagogue to worship God. To the extent that we understand synagogue worship in NT times, we assume the NT church in many ways adopted the form of worship known in the synagogue; they obviously included the gospel of Jesus Christ in their worship. Paul told the Thessalonians to read this letter in the church- they probably read it more than once and studied it as we do (5:27, cf. Col 4:16). Moreover, the apostle gave instructions as to what was acceptable and what was not acceptable in public worship. Here at the end of his first letter to the Thessalonians he gives instructions about public worship; the verbs are plural indicating instruction for a group not an individual (Stott). Paul has three do’s regarding worship, and then three don’ts; we have these two points as our subheadings today.

**1. Do rejoice, pray and give thanks**

Paul was always telling believers to rejoice. He tells the Thessalonians to ‘Rejoice always’ and the Philippians to ‘Rejoice in the Lord always’ (5:16, Phil 4:4). His letter to the Philippians is filled with ‘rejoice’, which is amazing considering he wrote this letter from prison. If we can rejoice in prison we can rejoice anywhere, and rejoice always. Is your life filled with rejoicing, rejoicing in the Lord? We all rejoice in holidays, in receiving a gift or watching a match. But clearly, the rejoicing Paul speaks of is different; it is more than emotion- it is a way of life. This rejoicing is not related to our day to day circumstances in life.

Paul’s rejoicing did not come from him telling himself others are worse off, or from emptying his mind through mediation. He speaks of rejoicing ‘in the Lord’. His rejoicing comes from knowing Jesus as his saviour and Lord, from knowing God as the creator and ruler of the universe and of everything in his life. Knowing his life was in God’s hands, and that nothing could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus, gave Paul great peace and much joy.

Pau was driven out of Thessalonica by the Jews but the church, the brethren, were still there, and they were suffering at the hands of the Jews. Moreover, some had lost loved ones and were concerned as to what would happen to them when Jesus returned. Some years ago I was in Kenya and went to a funeral every Saturday; one of the funerals was that of a young lady killed in a terrorist attack. Yet these Christians met together and rejoiced in the Lord. They sang loudly and danced before the Lord despite their poverty and afflictions.

Rejoicing in the Lord must be part of Christian worship. We rejoice by singing praises to the Lord from our hearts. Singing stirs the emotions but singing words of praise to the Lord lifts us up before the Lord, and the Lord himself is glorified. If our hearts are rejoicing in the Lord our mouths will be open wide with words of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Some shout at the football but are silent in church. Open your mouth and praise the Lord with all your heart and all your strength.

A second activity in public worship is prayer. We will all be reading our Bible and praying in private (Mat 6:6) but we should also be ready to pray in public. The Lord’s Prayer is a public prayer beginning, ‘Our Father in heaven’. I hope you can say this from your heart and from your mouth during worship. When the minister prays he is praying on your behalf so listen and say, ‘Amen’, say it aloud if you like. We can pray the Lord’s Prayer verbatim or we can use it as a model for our prayer. It begins with adoration; ‘Holy be your name’. We adore or worship God for who he is and what he has done. To call him ‘Father’ means so much in itself. God is the almighty creator of heaven and earth. His Son is our gracious redeemer.

In prayer we also confess our sins. We do this privately of course but we also ask forgiveness when reciting the Lord’s Prayer: ‘Forgive us our sins’. We ask the Lord keep us from sin, but we still sin in thought, word, and deed, sins of commission and sins of omission. In the prayer acronym, ACTS, we have just dealt with adoration and confession. What remains is thanksgiving and supplication or requests. Here in these verses Paul makes special mention of thanksgiving; ‘In everything give thanks’ (5:18).

Some churches have special days of thanksgiving, and in America the whole country has a day of thanksgiving- the 23 November this year. We would do well to adopt this practice and be more thankful to the Lord as a nation. We could also have a thanksgiving Sunday, but better still, give thanks to the Lord in every worship service. ‘Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits’ says the psalmist (Ps 103:2). The Lord delights to hear us singing his praises, and is also delighted to hear us thanking him for all his benefits and all his answers to our prayers. ‘Let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name’ (Heb 13:15).

Paul does not mention supplication here in these verses, maybe because we naturally ask God for things when we pray. Many of our prayers are for healing, but how many are prayers of thanksgiving for his healing mercies (Ps 103:3). The Lord may choose not to heal us of course, but still we rejoice in the Lord because our life is in his hands: ‘Whether we live or die, we are the Lords’ (Rom 14:8). He does not mention reading the Bible either, although he does command this letter to be read in public worship (5:27), and also refers to prophecies. Moreover, synagogue worship included a Bible reading so this probably continued in the church.

Why do we worship God in this way, with praise, with prayer, and with thanksgiving? ‘Because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus’ (5:18). We should be praying, ‘If this is God’s will’ in anything we do (James 4:15), but with worship we don’t even have to ask because it is God’s will. Too many Christians think they can decide if they will go to church or not. But if you decide not to go when it is God’s will for you to go, is this not disobedience? When deciding to go to church or not, do you consider your brothers and sisters who you are supposed to be encouraging, and do you consider Christ, the head of the church?

Paul told this church that God’s will was their sanctification (4:3). He urges them to love one another and encourage one another, especially their leaders. It is God’s will for us to worship together and have fellowship because this is how we grow and mature in our faith. Our society is one of widespread loneliness, as well as ignorance! People are looking for friends and for fellowship. You have a place for fellowship here in this church, so treasure it and maintain it with your presence.

**2. Don’t quench the Spirit, despise prophecies, or do evil**

In public worship we listen to God’s word, and respond with praise and prayer. In singing psalms we are listening to God’s word and responding at the same time. The NT church probably read the OT, as was done in the synagogue, and they also read Paul’s letters (5:27, Col 4:16). There were also prophets and prophecies, as indicated in verse 20. Paul and Peter spent a lot of time warning the church about false prophets and false teachers (2Peter 2:1). But they did not condemn all prophecy. Paul tells the Thessalonians not to despise prophecies or treat them with contempt (5:20). Why? Maybe their worship had become dry and ritualistic, or maybe they were overly cautious. In the previous verse he tells them not to quench the Spirit. Sadly, some in the church show contempt for the preached word, criticising what is the truth from God’s word.

‘What is prophecy?’ you may be asking. We read of prophets in the OT, men called by God to speak his words: ‘Thus says the Lord’. Their words were often of divine judgment. They were ‘forth-tellers’ as much as they were ‘fore-tellers’. The NT church still had the words of these prophets, along with the psalms. It also had its own prophets like Agabus, and Judas and Silas (Acts 11:27-28, 21:10-11, 15:32), and prophecy was among the gifts of the Holy Spirit; they did not have the completed NT canon as we have. Our Bible is the inspired and infallible word of God to which nothing is to be added (2Peter 1:21, 3:16, 2Tim 3:16, Rev 22:18). If we had prophets today like those of OT times we would be adding their words to the Bible!

Today we have men, prophets if you like, declaring, ‘Thus says the Lord’ as they read the Bible and preach from it. They do not receive direct divine revelation. This means you can test what they say from the Scripture. ‘Test all things’ writes Paul. There are still false prophets, men teaching their own ideas today, and they may claim divine revelation. Any such claim means they really are false prophets- think of Charles Russell of the JWs, and Joseph Smith of the Mormons. But whatever men preach or teach, we are to test all things and hold fast to what is good (5:21).

The first of a number of tests we can apply is the ‘Berean-test’ that was applied even to the preaching of the apostle Paul (Acts 17:11). Secondly, the divine-human person of Christ test; does the preacher teach Jesus as God in the flesh. Thirdly, the gospel of grace test. Fourthly, the character or conduct test of the preacher, the tree-is-known-by-its-fruit test. Fifthly, the does-it-work test; in the OT prophecy not fulfilled was not true prophecy, so if what is taught does not edify or build up the church it must be suspect.

Sadly, there are many false prophets or teachers out there preaching what itching ears want to hear. We have preachers saying that, in the name of love, pre-marital sex is okay, and, in the name of tolerance homosexuality is okay. ‘What is good’ refers to what is genuine and not counterfeit. We don’t see a lot of counterfeit bank notes these days, but we do see and hear counterfeit gospels being preached.

We return to the matter of quenching the Spirit in verse 19. What did Paul mean in the context of the Thessalonian church, and what does this mean for us today? The Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost with flames of fire appearing above the disciples; so quenching is like putting out a fire. Elsewhere Paul speaks of grieving the Holy Spirit of God (Eph 4:30). All believers are given the Holy Spirit when they believe but do all listen to the Spirit or walk in the Spirit? The Spirit convicts of sin but some choose not to hear such conviction. The Spirit guides us but some choose to be their own guide. In the church at Thessalonica were bludgers, busybodies, and bullies, as we have seen, and maybe sexually immoral members also (4:11, 3).

The Spirit is also present when believers gather for worship, and we are to worship in spirit and in truth, with our spirit being united with the Spirit of God (John 4:24, Rom 8:16). Without the Spirit, worship gets reduced to ritual, the following of set forms and words. We need to have order in worship, but we also need to let God’s Spirit touch and strengthen our hearts as we sing and pray and listen to God’s word. As we listen to God’s word read and preached, let us respond in faith and love, love for God and love for one another.

The third and last ‘don’t’ of worship, either public or whole of life, is to ‘abstain from every form of evil’ (5:22). Teachers in a liberal Indian Bible college took their students to a Hindu holy place with the idea of learning about worship from Hindus. Can you believe it? In the Roman Catholic Church we often see worshippers kissing images and throwing holy water about; do you read of such things in the Thessalonian church? God has told us how we are to worship him and is not pleased when we ignore or add to his instructions. So we must be examining the Scriptures to make sure we are being faithful to them in all we do, including our worship. Let us not be allowing any form of evil into our lives or worship. We have mentioned evils like sexual immorality being permitted in some churches. What about smoking ceremonies-will this be next?

Jesus says we are to worship in spirit and truth because God is Spirit and Jesus is truth. With our whole being, body and spirit, we are to join in public worship, doing the things Paul tell us in this passage, namely, listening to prophecy as we find it in the Bible and responding with praise and prayer. Remember, while rituals can quench the Spirit, disorder in worship is also dishonouring to God (1Cor 14:40).