

Views of Worship: Two Worshippers

I have always marveled at the myriad people, modes of participation and responses to the corporate worship experience. From the exuberant to the barely breathing, the passionate to the passive, the active participant to the spectator, the absorptive to the reflective, the hungry to the indifferent, pure to the putrid, experienced to the rookie, and on and on we could go. It is an absolute miracle of God that we can come together at all, find common ground, and have such a variety of personal, life-changing experiences unique from other worshippers.

While we were on vacation last week, Loretta and I had the opportunity to worship with our daughter Rebekah and her husband at Calvary Baptist Church in Dothan, Alabama. Not leading worship or playing an instrument allowed me to participate and take in the experience differently and in some ways more easily than I “normally do.” As I took in the many different faces of worship in that large, southern Alabama church, the music was familiar but fresh, lively and stirring. The pastor preached from Matthew 5. The people were dressed from “really nice” to quite casual. The worship leaders and musicians were contagious and the soloist was phenomenal (Beka).

But what struck me most there, as well as each Sunday here, is the many different faces of worship. Some enter the sanctuary carrying heavy burdens. That shows. Some come in seemingly almost ready to explode with the joy of the Lord. That really shows. Some come with great expectations while others enter with doubt and suspicion. Everyone enters bearing some different combination of the burdens and blessings of life.

Jesus told a parable about two very different worshippers. I hope we can learn from this parable. My concern is that we, if we're not careful, can allow the burdens we carry, agendas, feelings, perceptions, opinions, past experiences, or conflicts to keep us from having a fresh, life-changing encounter with holy God and that's what worship is all about.

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else: **10** "Two men went up to the temple complex to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11** The Pharisee took his stand and was praying like this: 'God, I thank You that I'm not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **12** I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.' **13** "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even raise his eyes to heaven but kept striking his chest and saying, 'God, turn Your wrath from me—a sinner!' **14** I tell you, this one went down to his house justified rather than the other; because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." **Luke 18:9-14 (HCSB)**

Two men went to the same place at the same time with the same purpose, but they had two very different experiences. Obviously there is more to prayer/worship than just showing up. .. I really don't think the fact that one was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector was a factor other than the possibility that the integrity, or lack thereof, in which they carried out those professions could

have at least somewhat negatively or positively impacted their readiness to enter the presence of God.

Story breakdown:

Place/position

The **Pharisee** “took his stand.” It seems he had a reserved, special place of honor. Surely it was more comfortable, prominent and ornate than that of common people. We might compare it to a box seat at a sporting event or concert hall. It was a guaranteed entitlement because of who he was. Anyone who entered the temple could see this was a “righteous” and significant man.

The **tax collector** stood “far off.” Where was far off? Away from the places of self-importance and self-righteousness. Opulence and comfort were not factor for this miserable sinner. It was a place though where he could get alone with God undistracted by the politics and jockeying for position of the elite. It was not a place of prominence or a way to get noticed, but a simple place where he could be honest with God and seek His mercy. It happened to be, in a strange but not too obvious way, a good place.

Point of view

The **Pharisee** seems to have immediately, upon entering the temple, let his gaze, his attention turn earthly, horizontally and particularly toward the tax collector. Maybe he had just reluctantly coughed up his taxes to the unpopular tax collector. To say the least, the Pharisee chose to allow the presence of the

tax collector to be the focus of his attention rather than the Lord, real prayer, and worship.

The **tax collector** seemed to only look inward at his own sinfulness. He didn't notice who else was there, what they were wearing, who might be watching, or who he might look at. He just saw himself a sinner in need of God's forgiveness and mercy.

Prayer

The **Pharisee** did not begin his time of prayer with the usual thanksgiving and praise nor with expressions of repentance seeking forgiveness. He began immediately by boasting of his own self-imposed righteousness. He bragged to God. Even if it was all true, this was not a wise choice of worship activity.

There is no one righteous, not even one; **R**omans 3:10 (HCSB)

Not only did he brag to God in a faux prayer about his own self-righteousness, but he clearly passed judgment on the tax collector. He may have known him only as the tax collector or very well as a neighbor or family member. None the less, his "prayer" was not really much of a prayer at all. It was a proclamation of self-righteousness and a pronouncement of judgment against the tax collector.

The **tax collector's** prayer was probably not an oratorical masterpiece, lengthy or impressive. Possibly no one could even hear him, except God, but it was exactly what he needed to express to Him. He was not performing to the temple audience.

He was pouring his heart out to God. He was not praying to impress. He was seeking an audience with His God. He was not concerned with what others thought. He was concerned with what God thought.

Attitude

Pharisee- pride, self-righteousness, judgment

Tax collector-humility, brokenness, repentance

Outcome

Pharisee- no prayer, no worship, did not encounter God,
Unchanged

Tax collector-forgiven, filled, purified, radically transformed

One might think- that was just a parable. It didn't really even happen. Those were not real people. Surely it has no relevance today. That story was about the Jewish temple, a Pharisee and a tax collector.....all strange to us... So why even discuss this?..... Why did Jesus tell parables? Because parables revealed, and still reveal, universal truth for all people, in all situations, and in all times. The parable was a teaching format which made the spiritual truth understandable for everyone. It may be a church instead of temple. It may be a business man and drug addict instead of a Pharisee and a tax collector. But we get it! It is about us, here, now, today.

Lessons for prayer/worship:

1. Choose your place (wisely)- To enter the place of worship at the appointed time with a sense of self-importance, entitlement, or superiority will crush any chance you had of meeting with, worshipping, and being changed by holy God.

We should enter this place and every place of worship with brokenness, humility, reverence and a sense of urgency to meet God. Choose your place carefully. How we prepare ourselves to enter and our actual entering to the worship experience is directly connected to what will happen in the time that follows.

⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you in due time, ⁷ casting all your care upon Him, because He cares about you. ¹Peter 5:6-7 (HCSB)

2. Avoid judgment-

We talked about this in our study of James 2 on Wednesday night. It's so hard not to look around. It's part of that old carnal, sinful nature, to look who's here and not here, how they're dressed, what they're saying and doing, and judge whether we think they're right with the Lord or not.

This one practice or habit can completely kill any chances you had with encountering holy God in any significant way.

⁹ But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹James 2:9 (HCSB)

Favoritism is just a subtle form of judging. And when we judge, we are playing God. This is sinful and very prohibitive of the worship experience.

3. Expect change (in you)- The Pharisee spent all his time bragging to God and judging the tax collector. He left the temple just as he came in, self-righteous, judgmental and empty.

Our primary anticipated outcome for worship should be change, not a feeling, not what is comfortable, not what is familiar. In fact, probably the least important factor in our worship experience is comfort. We can hope the A/C is working and we have a place to sit, but we need to often be made uncomfortable. If Jesus is being exalted and the Word proclaimed, discomfort is a good sign that God is still working on us. He's not finished. There are things in all of our lives that still need to be conformed to the image of Christ and where else in all the cafeteria of Christian activity than worship should this work of God to bring about change take place? In the worship environment!!!

6 I am sure of this, that He who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. **Phil 1:6** (HCSB)

And He will carry this out most frequently and effectively as we humbly seek Him through worship encounters.

4. Check your aim- Consider the tax collector. Look in, then look up. Never look around. How can we not look

around when the church is full of people? What a real conflict!

By the time I got to high school, I had figured something out. If I sat in the back of a classroom, I was easily distracted by every head scratch, note passed, and spit ball sent across the room that went on between me and the teacher. Call me a nerd if you must, but I started sitting in the front whenever I was allowed to. I could hear, see and learn better because I was less distracted.

I'm not recommending this, don't try this at home, this is only for trained professionals, but I made it all the way through high school without ever taking a book home, doing homework at home or ever studying for a test. I even took advanced courses.

I didn't do very well my first couple of semesters of college, not because I had poor study habits, but because I had no study habits.

² keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith Heb 12:2 (HCSB)

This passage in its context warns of being distracted. We must keep our eyes, mind, heart on Jesus. Worship is only worship when Jesus is the sole object of our attention and adoration.

Examine your attitude- Who are you more like on an average Sunday at New Hope, the Pharisee who is self-righteous and judging, or the tax collector who is humble and repentant.

28 So a man should examine himself; in this way he should eat of the bread and drink of the cup. **1** Cor 11:28 (HCSB)