

CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A SPIRITUAL HOUSE OF WORSHIP REVELATION 5: 1-14

CHILDREN'S SERMON

INTRODUCTION

In Alice in Wonderland there is a scene where Alice comes to a fork in the road and stands there saying to herself in a worried voice, "Oh, which way should I go? Which way should I go?" The Cheshire cat slowly fades into view in a tree above the fork and asks Alice what she is so worried about. After Alice tells him that she doesn't know which fork to choose the cat asks her, "Where are you trying to go?" Alice says, "I don't care where I go." To which the cat replies as he fades from view, "Then it really doesn't matter which road you choose." When an individual or a church loses sight of the purpose of life, then all discussion of what to do is an exercise in futility. Nothing is easier to forget than the purpose of life. Why am I taking up space on planet earth? Why do we exist as a church? These are the most important questions in life. If they are not answered or if they are answered incorrectly, then the rest of life goes wrong. It is my intention over the next 6 Sundays to help us think about that question. We have stated our purpose as a church. "Our purpose is to display the greatness of God" Over these next Sundays we are going to look at a number of the values we believe to be necessary for a church or an individual to hold if they are going to fulfill that purpose. Today we are going to examine one of the most basic values of our church and the one that in many ways is foundational to the purpose of all human life. We are going to talk about worship.

What do you think when you think of worship? For most of us worship either conjures up thoughts of "going to church" or of some esoteric, spiritual experience that is barely connected to reality. Worship is either something mundane and boring, a duty to be tolerated. Or it is so far beyond our experience that we can never hope to attain it. My goal this morning is not to define worship but to help us think about how we become worshipping people. But I do think it is helpful to consider two definitions of worship from the two men who have influenced me the most as I have sought to understand what worship is.

"Worship is a way of gladly reflecting back to God the radiance of His worth. It is not a mere act of willpower by which we perform outward acts. Without the engagement of the heart we do not really worship." John Piper in "Desiring God"

"Worship is the activity of glorifying God in his presence by adoring him in our hearts, by praising him with our voices and by telling people and angels about his excellence." Wayne Grudem in "Systematic Theology"

The thing to note in both of these definitions is that worship is an external expression of an internal response to God and his work in the world. True worship requires that I understand something of who God is and what he does, that I am impressed with what I understand and that I express what I am impressed by. It's just like when our family applauds and cheers for Jaimee. We perceive her doing something and we are delighted with her and what she does and so we applaud and cheer. Worship involves all of me, my mind, my affections and my body.

As I said, my ambition this morning is not to define worship as much as it is to discover something about how worship happens. I can think of no better place to go in the Scriptures than into heaven itself, where worship is as natural as cheering at a Packer game. We will take a look into heaven as revealed to the apostle John in the book of Revelation. Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to the book of Revelation says this:

"Worship is our response to a living God. If worship is neglected or tampered with, the church ends up in trouble. Worship is not a big thing in this day and age. The truth is, worship hasn't been a big thing in any

age. The world is hostile to worship. The Devil hates worship. As the Revelation makes clear, worship must take place in the midst of hostility and hate. Some Christians even get killed because they worship. John's Revelation is not easy reading...but his passion for Jesus comes through loud and clear. What else can we do when we read the Revelation but fall on our knees in adoration?

In the fifth chapter of Revelation we discover that...

MAIN POINT

Worship erupts when the church gathered together sees...

I. How pathetic things are (vv. 1-4)

In 4:1 we are told that John is taken up into heaven by the Holy Spirit where he sees things. Something you have to know about Revelation if you are going to make any sense out of it is that it is symbolic throughout. In other words, John is not describing what heaven and earth literally looks like but he is telling us about a vision that the Holy Spirit gave him to represent actual, literal, historical persons, places and events. In chapters 4 and 5 what he sees is the throne of God in heaven. If you look at 4:8 and 11 you can see that the one who sits on the throne is the Lord Almighty. He is holy, He is the one who was and who is and who is to come. He also is the creator of all things. Look at the triumphant way chapter 4 ends in vv. 9-11. The 4 living creatures are praising God incessantly and the 24 elders are on their faces worshipping the great creator God.

Now look at how 5:1 begins. Read it. This picture is taken from the court of the Roman emperor. A king would write out his orders on a scroll, roll it up and then seal it with wax and put his ring in the wax as a mark that it was from him. It would be taken to one his governors or to a general in the field or an ambassador. Only a person who had been duly appointed by the king had the right to open the scroll. If anyone else opened it they would be killed.

The scroll is God's plan for history. It is his decree as to how He is going to destroy all his enemies and save his people. It is "the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" as Paul says in Eph. 1:11. It is the content of the rest of the book of Revelation, beginning in 6:1. (Show the opening of the seals in 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12 and 8:1) It is written on both sides to show that it is the full and complete statement of God's plan for planet earth. It is sealed with 7 seals to show that it is impossible for anyone, except for God's appointed agent, to open it and execute his orders.

Now v. 3 reveals to us that there is a problem with fulfilling God's will on the earth. The problem is that there is no one who is worthy to open it and execute it. The idea of worth is not so much the idea of merit, of being good enough, but rather, of having the legal right to open it and the power to execute what is written in it. A search is made throughout all of creation and no one is found who has the right and the power to open it. In other words, God's will for the earth is not going to take place. God's kingdom is not going to come. God will not be shown to be a great and merciful God in the salvation of his people and in the destruction of evil. Don't miss this striking implication. Not even the Lord Almighty has the right to open the scroll. God the creator who has written out the scroll does not have the right to open it, to execute his will on the earth.

Now this stunning fact is more than John can take and he begins to weep and weep. That evil will never be destroyed, that the righteous will continue to suffer, that creation will never be what God intended it to be, that God's power and mercy and holiness will be forever mocked and maligned by Satan and sinful humanity is more than he can take and so he weeps. He longs for God and for God's kingdom to be fully established. He longs for not only himself but for all God's people to fully experience the presence of God.

This opening scene of chapter 5 ought to encourage us as we consider how most of us feel when we come together on Sunday mornings. We come to church out of the midst of sin and sickness and sadness and distraction. We live in a world all week that is far more concerned with humans, with human life and with finding happiness here than in God and his kingdom. God seems at best a distant and vague figure, not the source of all our happiness. He

does not seem very relevant to our lives. The world seems to be spinning along without him. Our own lives seem to be so empty of God and so full of everything else. So worship starts with weeping over all the ways in which we do not see God's kingdom being expressed as we know it ought to be expressed. We begin worship, like John, with a deep longing for God's will to prevail on the earth, with God to be present here, with us. We long for assurances that God is going to prevail. Worship begins with an open admission of our plight and a heartfelt cry to God for deliverance, for a deliverer. You and I will never worship until our longing for God's salvation outstrips every other longing in our lives. Until we see how pathetic our lives and our world is without God we will never truly worship God.

Worship erupts when the church gathered together sees...

- *How pathetic things are*
- *And sees...*

II. How prominent Jesus is (vv. 5-7)

In v. 5, one of the elders proclaims the gospel to John. He tells him he can stop weeping because someone has been found who has the right to open the scroll and the power to make what is written there happen. He identifies the one who is able to do this with two OT descriptions of the Jewish Messiah. Both of these references highlight the Messiah's authority and power as the king of Israel. In both Genesis 49 and Isaiah 11 the Messiah is pictured as the one who saves God's people and punishes the wicked. The elder says that this Messiah can open the scroll because he has triumphed, he has won a victory. The coolest thing is that towards the end of John's gospel, John 16:33, Jesus says this to his disciples, "In this world you will have trouble but take courage, I have overcome (or triumphed over) the world." Jesus says the same thing to the disciples and to us that this elder is now saying to John. "Cheer up! Don't be sad. I have won a great victory over all my enemies, Satan, sin and the whole world system that is opposed to God. I know things look bad, that sin seems to have the upper hand in your life and in the world. But evil is not in control of the world or your life. I am working out the results of my victory even now. I am fulfilling God's plan for the ages."

In v. 6, John's weeping ceases and he looks and sees, not a lion, not a conquering king, but a Lamb! This is such an awesome picture of the exalted Christ. Now again this is a perfect example of how Revelation works. While this is what the Holy Spirit showed John in his vision, this is not what Jesus literally looks like in heaven. This vision is given to impress us with what it is that makes Jesus great. It is a stunning vision and communicates such amazing truth in such a simple picture. The first thing John notices is that this lamb looks as if it has been slain. In other words the most striking feature of the lamb is that its throat has been slit. But, even though it looks as if it ought to be dead, it is standing, it is alive. The lamb has been killed and has come to life. Now notice where it is standing. It is standing in the center of the throne, surrounded by all these creatures and the elders whose job it is to worship God. This lamb is where only God can be.

Then he has seven horns. A horn is the symbol of strength throughout the OT. To have seven horns is to have perfect strength, to be completely full of power. The seven eyes are a picture of the omniscience of Jesus. He has perfect knowledge of the whole universe. The seven eyes are the seven spirits of God that are sent out into all the earth. The eyes represent the Holy Spirit who is sent out into the earth to accomplish all God's work among men. In this one verse we see a figurative and exalted vision of the trinity. There is only one God because there is only one throne. Yet on this one throne there is the Lord Almighty, the creator God, who has a sovereign plan for all the earth. Then there is the lamb who was slain and who is now alive and is able to fulfill God's plan. Finally, there is the Holy Spirit who is sent out by the Father and the Son to effect what the Father planned and what the Son's victory gained.

Look at v. 7. Without an explanation of how this happens, the lamb who is in the center of the throne, now comes to the throne and takes the scroll out of the right hand of the one who is sitting on the throne. The relationship between the Father and the Son is pictured here. In John 5:26-27 Jesus says this, "For as the Father has life in

himself, so he has granted the son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.” The Father delegates the authority for saving and judging into the Son’s hands.

There are two things that keep us from being people that gladly reflect back to God the radiance of His worth. Our vision is full of either despair over the absence of God and of good in our lives or our vision is full of the world and all the good that can be found here. John shows us that if we are going to be a worshipping people our vision needs to be full of a vision of Christ. He is the conquering king, who has triumphed and who now stands on the throne of God to execute God’s plan by sending out the Holy Spirit into the world. Jesus is preeminent in heaven, he is at the center of attention there because of who he is. Is he the center of our attention?

Worship erupts when the church gathered together sees...

- *How pathetic things are*
- *How prominent Jesus is*
- *And sees...*

III. How potent Jesus is (vv. 8-10)

Now look at what happens when Jesus takes the scroll from the hand of God. (Read v. 8) Worship erupts in heaven. Finally, here is someone who has the authority and the power to execute God’s will upon the earth. I hope I’m not being blasphemous in making this comparison but something like this happened among basketball fans in 1995. The Chicago Bulls won three national championships in 91, 92 & 93. Then, in the summer of 1993, Michael Jordan retired from basketball. The world of basketball fans mourned and the hopes of all Bull’s fans were crushed. The next year the Bull’s didn’t even make the playoffs. In March of 95 it was revealed that Michael was coming out of retirement and the whole basketball world rejoiced, especially Bulls fans. We lived in Illinois at the time and it was amazing to watch the euphoria that swept the entire state. Worship was once again taking place in Chicago at every home game. Michael was back and even though the Bulls would have a tough time making the playoffs, all was now right with the world. Bulls fans knew it was only a matter of time before they were on top of the world again. While he was not in game condition his presence got the Bulls into the playoffs. They were beat in the first round but by the next year the Bulls were once again the unbeatable Bulls and they went on to win three more consecutive championships in 96, 97 & 98.

It is exactly the same thing that is taking place here when Jesus takes the scroll from the Father’s hand. Evil and suffering are still rampant in the world, but heaven knows and the earth is about to find out, that it’s only a matter of time before God’s kingdom comes in all its fullness to this earth because the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, the lamb who was slain has come. Notice that each of the living creatures and the elders have a harp which is the basic instrument of worship and they each have a bowl of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. The prayers of the saints are like incense in the throne room of heaven. These prayers are the longings of God’s people for him to come and set up his kingdom. It is our prayers for God’s kingdom to come and for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. The lamb of God is greeted in heaven with the adoration of angels and on earth with the longings of God’s people for God. Does our praying reflect this concern? Are we earnestly pleading with God to send his kingdom or are we content with the way things are?

The 4 living creatures and the elders worship the Lamb with a new song. It is new because of the new thing that the lamb has done. He has been slain, come to life and now sends out his Holy Spirit to accomplish God’s will on the earth. Their song now makes explicit what has been hinted at up to this point. Why does the lamb have the right to open the scroll and where does his power to execute what is written there come from? The power and authority of the lamb come from his death. The cross of Christ is the #1 historical event of all time. Have you been noticing all the lists of top 10 and top 100 people and events of the century and millenium? We are obsessed with identifying the most significant people and events of the last 100 and 1000 years. This vision of heaven tells us that Jesus is the most important person in the history of the world and his death is the single most important event in the history of the universe. In fact, history makes no sense apart from Christ. The history of the world

and the history of your life are meaningless apart from the person and work of Jesus. He is the center of everything.

The other thing to notice here is the purpose of Jesus' dying. Notice that the emphasis is not on the benefit that comes to people but on the benefit that comes to God by what Jesus does. He was slain and he purchased men for God. He made them a kingdom and priests for God. (The NIV inserts the verb "to serve". It is not in the text. It simply says he made them a kingdom and priests for God.) Jesus came to earth and died on a cross in order to purchase men for God. He offers the church to God as a gift. Again notice that all the work is done by Jesus. He came to earth to save a particular group of people out of all the different kinds of people that are on the earth. He purchased them and then he made them into a kingdom and priests and he will cause them to reign on the earth. Christ does all the work so that God receives all the credit, all the glory. Notice, we do gain much. We are God's kingdom, the people and place where he rules. We are priests to God. We live in his presence and gladly reflect back to him the radiance of his worth and we represent him here on earth. One day we will reign on this earth. But all these benefits are given to us, performed for us by Christ and he does it to bring honor to his Father.

There is wonder in the song of the elders and living creatures. They are amazed that Jesus has been able to create a unified people out of the great diversity of humanity. Imagine people out of all languages and races and cultures adoring and worshipping one God. A being that can capture the affections of such a diverse group of people must be great. This is especially the case when it is noted that those who adore this God are by nature His enemies.

What impresses you more? You're sin or Christ's ability to make you part of God's kingdom and a priest for God? The suffering of your life or the ability of Christ to bring God's kingdom to earth? The pleasures of this life or the pleasure of belonging to Jesus? Jesus has won a great victory through his death and he has purchased a people for God from every people group in the world. He alone is worthy of praise. He is a million times more impressive than Michael Jordan or anyone or anything else on the face of this planet. If you are not impressed with him, you are out of step with reality.

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- *How prominent Jesus is*
- *How potent Jesus is*
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IV. How praised Jesus is (vv. 11-14)

Notice how there is an increasing level of praise for Jesus. First the 4 living creatures and the elders praise him, then in vv. 11-12 an innumerable number of angels praise him and finally in vv. 13-14 all of creation praises him. He is not only the center of attention in heaven but he is the center of attention in the entire universe. I know that not everyone in here is a Packer fan. Those of you who are not Packer fans, have you ever felt out of place in Wisconsin? Have you ever been in a conversation when a bunch of fans begin ranting and raving about the Packers and you feel completely left out? Maybe it even makes you a little mad. This happens not just with sports fanatics but with any kind of fanatic. If you are in a group of people who are talking about a common interest and you don't share that interest, you feel left out and you might feel offended. You need to know something. Jesus Christ will one day be the center of everyone's and everything's attention. He is now the center of attention in heaven and one day all of creation worship Him as the ruler of the universe. You will not only feel left out but you will be left out if he does not become the center of your attention now, so you can join in then.

He is more impressive than the most impressive human being that has ever lived. If all the angels and all creation cannot help but declare his worth does it make any sense for you to live your life ignoring him? Does it make any sense for you to give your time and attention to pursuing happiness in houses and jobs and families and computers and hunting and shopping when the whole universe is overwhelmed with the greatness of Jesus Christ? Our

preoccupation with ourselves and the created world makes no sense when we see what preoccupies the attention of the universe. So give yourself to this great work of making Jesus Christ the center of your attention because one day he is going to be at the center whether you like it or not.

This will only happen when the Holy Spirit enables us, like John, to see the lamb who was slain being worshipped by all creation. So let us join our prayers with the prayers of all God's people through the centuries that we might see and be impressed with Jesus and so gladly reflect back to him the radiance of his worth. Next week we are going to talk about prayer and its importance in our lives. Then we are going to spend extra time throughout the week getting together for the purpose of prayer. I want to encourage everyone here to make sure you join with your brothers and sisters in Christ at least one time during the week to pray. We are doing this in order to ask God to enable us to see Jesus and be impressed with him.

BENEDICTION IN SONG

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