

40 DAYS OF COMMUNITY- CREATED TO WORSHIP TOGETHER

By Rev. Leo Douma
Rom 12:1

After attending church one Sunday morning a little boy knelt at his bedside that night and prayed, "Dear God, we had a good time at church today- but I wish you had been there!" One of the things we know is special about coming together for worship is our Lord's promise, "*Where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them*". The question is, how much do we notice the presence of God when we come together for worship? You see, a lot of what passes for worship can just be people going through a routine, or an expectation about the preacher. The story is told of the great orator, the American preacher, Henry Ward Beecher. One day he couldn't preach and a visiting minister substituted for him. A large audience had already gathered to hear Beecher and when they saw the substitute minister step up to the pulpit several disappointed listeners began to move toward the exits. That's when the minister said loudly, "All who have come here today to worship Henry Beecher may now withdraw from the church. All who have come to worship God keep your seats." What drew you to church today? Was there some sense of routine? Was it a deep desire to worship God? Was it a mixture? And why is it that we desire to worship God? C.S. Lewis once wrote: "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are too easily pleased." Do you understand what he is saying? He says in effect, "You want to settle on sex, drugs, a career, fame, fortune? Please, why stay with the boring stuff?! Your problem is your desires are too weak, your goals are too small, there's not enough passion! Get with it and be filled with the greatest in life; God himself!! Too many settle for what God gives, what this life has to offer. But to truly worship God you must come to see that God himself is the greatest pleasure in your life. You need to see, as our theme for this sixth week in the 40 Days of Community puts it, that we were "***created to worship together.***" The Westminster Catechism in its first question asks "What is the chief purpose of man (ie being human)? And the answer says, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." John Piper in his book "Desiring God" puts it slightly different: "Our purpose is to glorify God by enjoying him forever?" Does this language seem a bit strange to you? It's not quite what you had in your Reformed tradition? Well, look at the Bible and you will see that enjoying God is at the heart of the psalms. In Psalm 63 David expresses his deep desire for God (verse 1) "*O God you are my God, earnestly I seek you/ my soul thirsts for you/ my body yearns for you/ in a dry and weary land/ where there is no water.*" The setting there is that David is in the desolate Judean desert with very little provision. He fled Jerusalem because his son Absalom was out to kill him and take over as king. You notice that David, hungry and thirsty as he is in that desert, has a far deeper longing for something other than water; namely God himself. What David does is to use a physical reality (namely his terrible thirst) to illustrate his spiritual condition. That desperate longing David had for water, his soul had for God: "...*my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you...*" You notice how he says that not just his soul but his "*body longs*" for God. Does that sound strange to you, that you can long for God with every fibre of your being? But doesn't the Bible say to "*Love the lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength*"? A.W. Tozer once wrote: "What is worship? Worship is to feel in your heart and express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder and overpowering love in the presence of that most ancient Mystery, ...whom we call our Father in heaven."

Now all of this makes us think again about why it is that we gather as we do on a Sunday. We come together for a 'worship service'. The word 'worship' is the key word on our text in Romans 12:1 "*...which is your spiritual worship.*" The word 'worship' comes from the old English 'worth-ship' which means to bring a gift or service in adoration and praise of God. The Hebrew word originally signified the labour of servants. We notice two things in that definition. First, the centre of attention

is not us but God, and his worth. Second, worship requires that we bring something; gifts and acts of service. So the first thing to remember as we gather for worship is that God is here. Psalm 96 describes God as *“The Lord [who is] most worthy of praise/ he is to be feared above all gods...[He is] the Lord who made the heavens./ Splendour and majesty are before him/ strength and glory are in his sanctuary.”* That God is right here with us. This is what we have been created for. We are here together to present ourselves before the ‘Living God.’ The moment we come for worship our attention should be on God. We should be considering his overwhelming greatness. We should be filled with awe and wonder. We should be filled with gratitude at God’s amazing love shown in His Son. When we have this deep longing, like David’s thirst to be in God’s presence, and we have that sense of awe at the wonder of who God is-then we begin to worship. The second thing about worship is that we are to bring gifts, acts of service which honor God. Note Psalm 96:9&8 *“Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness, tremble before him, all the earth...Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name, bring an offering and come into his courts.”* Romans 12:1 *“Therefore I urge you, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies and living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God which is your spiritual worship.”* The point is clear, isn’t it? Worship is giving, offering, sacrificing. So worship is not first what you receive, what you ‘get out of it.’ Worship is giving to God; it is serving. And what I give, how I serve, must be in obedience to God’s Word; it must be the very best. You notice in our text Paul writes *“...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.”* The imagery here is of the Old Testament worship. When an Israelite went to the temple to worship God he brought offerings according to the laws given to Moses. A live animal was brought and offered to the priest to be sacrificed on the altar. Now those offerings were to be the very best of what the worshipper had. When the Israelite offered a lamb he did not bring a sick one, or one that had been attacked by a wild animal. No he brought one of his prize animals. He really gave. It was a giving that cost, it was a sacrifice. It had to be *“holy and acceptable to God.”* It’s interesting to note Paul uses technical temple language here: *“...offer your bodies... present your offering...”* To ‘present’ was to place your offering in the priest’s hands for sacrifice. So you took your hands off the animal, leaving it with the priest. It was given; no longer yours. So when we *“offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices”* it means we take our life and all we have and place it in God’s hands; and take our hands off. Our lives are no longer ours. It is a ‘holy offering’; that is it is set aside for God; for God’s use only!

Now what is *“holy and acceptable to God”* when we come to worship? It is the total giving of ourselves. Again looking at what Paul says in our text, *“...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.”* That is what real worship is; when you give yourself; when you give yourself completely in obedience to God. As distinct from the Old Testament, we are to be a living sacrifice. We serve God with our living. Each thought we have, every word we say, each action we do are all to be acts of worship. This total devotion obviously means that all of life is worship. That’s why Paul writes in verse 2 *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world...”* As Christians we are called to be different. And that difference is all part of our worship of God by our obedient living. All of life is worship, but worship is most focused when we worship together. In the Bible there is a real emphasis on the gathering together for worship. The psalms are full of it. The word ‘ecclesia’ which we translate as ‘church’ means “the gathering.” To be together in worship is so important. The public gathering is a visible declaration to the community that we serve the living God, that all of life is called upon to recognize and serve God. It is also so important for each of us to gather together for worship. The story is told of a man who decided he could just as well serve God by himself in nature. So he stopped going regularly to church. His minister visited him one cold night. Sitting by the open fire the minister noticed the hot coals glowing and radiating heat. Quietly he got the tongs and took out a coal and laid it on the hearth. It didn’t take long for the coal to stop glowing and grow cold. As the two men stared at the coal, the man said to his minister, “I’ll see you in church on Sunday.” The main theme these last few weeks has been on community, how we need each other for fellowship, to be able to grow, to serve, to reach out. God made us communal beings, just as he is. So it’s in our togetherness that we grow

best, that we truly worship. On our own we can struggle with doubt, we can slide from doing our devotions; we can slip into wrong behaviour patterns. But if we gather each week for worship there is something special about all the people together expressing their faith in confession and song, all together being encouraged and challenged by the word. Your regular attendance is an act of service to God; and it's an act of service to the others gathered. It is a sad thing if many Christians decide to turn up occasionally for a worship service. They deprive God of the public honor he is due, and they deprive fellow Christians of their encouraging presence.

What it comes down to, as we have been saying, is that worship is bringing your sacrifices, your acts of service. And that has to do with our attitude. Let me put it this way. Whenever I watch a game of Rugby League I confess I am bored, no matter what's happening. Why? Being of Aussie Rules background I have little clue as to what is happening, and being neither a club member nor player I have no interest in the result of the game. My attitude would be very different if I were a player, who has been preparing for the game all week and who will give it my best shot to see that our team wins. Those who say church is boring and they get nothing out of it, are often those who have not made a serious commitment to Jesus as Lord. If you are not a 'player', if you don't love Jesus, the worship service will seem a dull routine. That's why Paul starts off this verse by saying, "*Therefore I urge you in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices.*" Paul urges this worship, "*in view of God's mercies.*" In the first 11 chapters Paul has been writing about the way God has brought forgiveness and life through the death and resurrection of Jesus, how we have been adopted as God's children, we are his heirs even! He is so inspired by what God has done that at the end of chapter 11 he cries out in praise: "(11:33) *Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.*" To truly worship God you must know the utter joy of being forgiven, the depth of what God has done for you. So let me ask you; do you really know Jesus as Saviour and Lord? If not, talk with me today; it is vital, eternally vital, that you do.

Now, to practically give ourselves in service to God in the worship it means we should prepare ourselves; that we see public worship together as the climax of the week. It's to be what we long for; to be together with God and each other in adoration and praise. To help prepare let me make some suggestions. Consider making Saturday night reasonably early. We say that we are to give our total selves in worship to God; that includes our bodies. There is nothing more distracting from real worship than a tired body and a hangover head. Spend time in prayer before coming asking God's Spirit to prepare your frame of mind to meet with God. During the service, concentrate on God himself. As you sing focus on the words and express adoration and love for God. When the Bible is read and preached on, listen to it as Words from the Father. Be receptive, "Lord speak to me through your servant today." When the offering comes around really give, not just some change but giving sacrificially. Those of us who lead should give our absolute best in reading, music, praying, preaching. We come totally prepared to offer ourselves, our best, in grateful praise. Doing this is never too much. Our service is an inadequate response to the God who first served us, who stooped in His Son so we could experience His grace. C.S. Lewis wrote "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses the enjoyment but completes the enjoyment." May our services of worship together express and complete our enjoyment of our hearts' greatest desire; and may God be deeply honored!