

Preparing to Worship

by Coty Pinckney 1/31/2009

How do you prepare for corporate worship?

God gave the Israelites extensive regulations regarding how they were to prepare for tabernacle or temple worship; someone who was unprepared was unclean. Living a normal life in this world could lead to uncleanness; explicit acts of sin were not necessarily involved.

Mark 7, Acts 10, and other passages make clear that the specific cleanliness regulations God gave the Israelites are not binding on Christians today. But those same passages make clear that the picture they provide of the need to prepare ourselves for worship still holds.

So we too must prepare ourselves for worship. How? First, *acknowledge that corporate worship is of central importance*. We are not to neglect to meet together (Hebrews 10:25); instead we are to praise God in the midst of the congregation (Psalm 22:22). In this way we fulfill God's purpose in our creation (Isaiah 43:6-7). Expressing joy in Christ together is vital for us as Christians. We should think of it as more important than a class exam; more important than a key presentation at work; more important than a job interview or a league championship. Thus, we should prepare ourselves for worship as least as well as we prepare ourselves for these other events.

Second, *prepare yourself physically by getting sufficient rest the night before*. We will not worship God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength if we are drowsy because of late activities Saturday night.

Third, *prepare yourself spiritually*. Consider these different aspects of spiritual preparation:

a) Cleanse yourself from defiling thoughts. Jesus makes this point in Mark 7. In declaring all foods clean, he points out a key truth that underlies the distinction between clean and unclean:

"What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 7:20-23).

Similarly, Paul tells the Corinthians to examine themselves prior to participating in the Lord's Supper, lest they eat and drink in an unworthy manner, and thereby bring guilt on themselves (1 Corinthians 11:27-28).

So ask God to search your heart and see if there is any grievous way in you (Psalm 139:23-24). Confess and repent of those sins. Preach the Gospel to yourself, and lean on the forgiveness that is ours through Christ's death.

b) Seek forgiveness from others for anger and other defiling sins. In the context of teaching that anger is the equivalent of murder, Jesus tells us to go to a brother we have sinned against and seek reconciliation prior to offering a gift on the altar (Matthew 5:21-24). That is, we can't offer ourselves to God – we can't be living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1) – when we have known, unconfessed sins against our brothers and sisters.

c) Read and meditate on the sermon text, the service themes, the Scripture passages, and the song lyrics. This is part of my own Sunday morning ritual, whether or not I am preaching. By the time the call to worship is read, my mind is already absorbed in the morning's themes. If you would like to receive a the bulletin via email ahead of time to facilitate this, let me know.

d) Pray for the time of corporate worship. Pray for all the individuals involved in leading the service; pray for the preaching of the Word; pray for the Holy Spirit's presence among us, opening hearts, enlightening eyes, convicting of sin, giving new life; pray that others would come to the service prepared; pray for your own heart to be receptive to the Word; pray against Satan's attempts to distract others from coming and being attentive; pray through the Scripture passages. If at all possible, pray with others for the service. All are welcome at our prayer time, which now is 7:40 to 8:05. In my own life, I have seen tremendous differences when I have prayed, and when I have failed to pray for the service. Remember John 14:13: "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

Fourth, *prepare yourself to serve others*. Hebrews 10:24-25 reads "We must consider one another, how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging and exhorting one another" (my translation). So before coming to worship together, consider one another. Consider how you might encourage others in the body. Consider who needs an arm around the shoulder; consider who needs a kick in the pants. Consider a verse you might share with one person; consider planning a time together with another. Consider who you might discuss the service and sermon with; consider whose insights you need to seek out. You are the body of Christ, and members of one another (Romans 12:5). So prepare through planning to serve.

So prepare yourself for worship – and may the Father be glorified in the Son as we express joy in Christ together.