



A Place for You: Worship

1 Corinthians 10:31-33; Hebrews 10:23-26; Nehemiah 8

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Main Point

Only the power of the gospel could bring together in the church people so different from each other. One of the ways that we express our unity is through how we worship corporately and individually.

A. Introduction: As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What are some areas of your life where you could use more discipline?

What about worship? Do you associate a need for discipline with your worship of God?

Practicing the discipline of worship, both personal and corporate, is vital as a means of growing in Christlikeness. Just like we need discipline to eat well, spend less money, or use our time better, we also need discipline in our spiritual lives for things like prayer, going to church, and serving. God calls us to worship Him on a daily, ongoing basis, both on our own and by gathering together with other believers.

The “first base” of our discipleship process at New Vision is the call to worship. Worship means to give worth or value to an object. In our lives we can see that the foundation of our lives is to be the worship of God as our Lord and Savior. Then we begin to learn how everything in our lives is to be seen through the eyes of worshipping God.

Today we are going to look at the act of worship in our lives individually and corporately as a body of believers and how it can help us to grow as disciples and lead us to make sure we know our place within the body of Christ.

B. Understanding: Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

1. What Lifestyle Worship Looks Like

Have a volunteer read 1 Corinthians 10:31-33.

How difficult is it for you to do all things—even the mundane—for the honor of God?

What is the connection between honoring God in all we do and being a witness to others (v. 33)?

How should wanting to see others become followers of Christ impact how we do everything else in our lives?

Paul reminded his readers that the chief end of human beings is the glory of God; His honor should be the principle concern of those who love Him. We live in light of the gospel and honor Him by doing all we can to bring about the salvation of others. Nothing should hinder the magnification of Christ in our lives.

Colossians 3:16-17 encourages us to look at everything in our lives as worship to God. How does that happen in your life currently?

Let's continue to see not only what worship looks like for us individually, but let's see the purpose in gathering as the body of Christ.

2. Why We Gather

Ask a volunteer to read Hebrews 10:23-26.

The writer of Hebrews said we should relentlessly pursue our hope. How would you describe Christian hope to a non-Christian?

What are some ways we can pursue that hope together?

The first thing the passage tells us to do is to hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering. Essentially, this means we are to continue in our love for God with our whole beings because of hope. Because Jesus doesn't

change in His faithfulness, we know that no matter what our circumstances are there will always be hope in this life or the next.

In what way can we, in the church, provoke one another to good deeds?

Who is someone in your life that has done that for you?

When we come together in the church, we should be challenging each other by our acts of love and service. The provoking here is a good thing—we are constantly motivated when we look around us to continue to do good inside and outside the church.

Why do you think it's important that we don't give up meeting together (v. 25)?

What are some reasons we might give up meeting together?

If it's so important, what kind of attitude should we have when we are able to come together in the church?

In the day and time this text was first written, the Christians were undergoing persecution and were being tempted to give up their faith. For us, it might not be persecution but convenience or leisure that might keep us from meeting together. But when we come together, even though we are different, and meet together regularly, we show the world the power of the gospel.

How do you see a sense of urgency emphasized in this passage?

How should knowing that Jesus will eventually come back change the way we look at our everyday lives?

What responsibility do we have to help each other do that?

Time is short. Jesus will eventually be back, and that day is approaching. Because it is, we should be all the more committed to doing the things we find in this passage. And as we do, we should know that our unity in the midst of our diversity to the church is a testimony to the rest of the world about the power of the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

3. What Community Worship Looks Like

Have a volunteer read Nehemiah 8:1-8.

How did the Jews respond to the reading of the law? Why do you think the Jews were willing to listen to the reading of the law for several hours?

In Nehemiah 8, the Israelites “listened attentively” to the Book of the Law (Genesis–Deuteronomy) for about six hours, from morning to noon. One of the main reasons they were so attentive is because they did not have personal access to the Word of God. Just imagine it. What if our church decided to meet for six hours this Sunday? To us, that might seem like a long time to listen to a Scripture reading. But during the days of Nehemiah, the Jewish exiles couldn’t get enough of it.

Why is it important that believers today read the Word of God both alone and together?

The reading of God’s Word reminds us of God’s eternal character. It reminds us how we, like the returning exiles, are given the choice either to obey or disobey God. Through the reading of God’s Word, we are reminded of our heritage—where we came from and who we are. We are reminded of God’s faithfulness to our ancestors and His mighty acts of restoration. But most of all, through the reading of God’s Word, we are reminded that God has a master plan, a mission to restore what His people lost—all through the power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Have a volunteer read Nehemiah 8:9-16.

How did Nehemiah redirect the people’s response and what did they do?

Why is obedience an act of worship?

With the words “Do not mourn or weep,” the leaders stressed the importance of joyous celebration. The people already had started to grieve as they heard the Law read. Although sorrow and repentance are proper responses to hearing God’s Word, the leaders did not want the people to miss the joy that should also result.

From the reading of the Law, the Jews learned that in the seventh month they should be observing the Feast of Tabernacles. Regulations for this fall feast are given in Leviticus 23:33-43 and Deuteronomy 16:13-15. When the Jews heard this Law read, they knew they should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month, so they immediately responded by building booths and obeying what they had learned from God’s Word. Obedience to God is evidence of love for Him and relationship with Him.

C. APPLICATION: Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How does the invitation to worship challenge you today?

An important part of worship is focusing on God. What are some specific things you could do to help focus on God during your corporate worship times? your family worship times? Your times of private worship?

What attitudes or other distractions need to be eliminated so you can focus on God in your corporate or personal worship?

D. Pray

Pray and thank God for the hope we have. Thank Him that He is faithful, and because He is, we know that no matter what else happens we will always have hope. Thank Him for the gift of the church and pray that your church would be a place where we know what it means to truly come together in Him. Also, encourage everyone to voice their own prayers of gratitude and praise to God for who He is and how He is working in their lives. Then close your prayer time by thanking God for the opportunity He gives us to come before Him in worship.

Commentary

1 Corinthians 10:31-33

10:31. Paul had counseled his readers about how to handle their differences on matters of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In conclusion, he gave them a general principle that Christians are to do everything for God's glory.

10:32. We should not use this principle to engage in behavior that is intentionally detrimental to other people. While it might be impossible to avoid offending all people all the time, Paul's point was that Christians are to be considerate of others and even put their perspectives ahead of our rights. By specifying the "Jews or the Greeks or the church of God," Paul emphasized that principle applied regardless of whom Christians were dealing with.

10:33. Paul was not a "people pleaser" in the sense that he would compromise the faith just to get along with others. His position was a restatement of the principle that he would adapt his approach as needed to see people get saved.

Paul returned to the question of Christian liberty in chapter 10 and repeated the need to take into consideration our effect on others before we act. He generalized his argument against eating meat sacrificed to idols by saying "whatever you do, do everything for God's glory." As believers and servants of God we are to make His will supreme in our lives. Whatever pleases God and shows our subjection to His will glorifies Him. God wants us to love others and to encourage them in their obedience to Him. Sometimes this demands sacrifice and surrender of our rights.

Paul urged believers to "give no offense" to anyone. He specifically mentioned three groups Christians were not to hinder by their actions. "The Jews" probably refers to Jewish unbelievers. Paul encouraged Jewish Christians to be sensitive to their adherence to Old Testament law in order to gain a hearing. An example in Paul's ministry was the decision to circumcise Timothy (Acts 16:3) when he joined Paul in evangelizing Jews. Paul never submitted to Jewish laws when there was the possibility of making law rather than grace the means of salvation (Gal. 2:3).

The second group Paul urged believers give no offense to were "Greeks," or Gentile unbelievers. In 1 Corinthians 10:27 Paul instructed believers not to question the source of meat served to them by unbelievers at a meal. The purpose was to avoid unnecessarily offending them. However, if they made it known the meat had been sacrificed to idols, the believers were not to eat it as

a witness to the unbelievers (v. 28). The emphasis is again on making choices and setting an example that would lead the lost to Christ and away from idolatry.

The third group was “the church of God.” The focus here, as in chapter 8, was a concern for weaker Christians. The concern for the Jews and Greeks was not to hinder their hearing the gospel and being saved. For the church of God the concern was for their sanctification and spiritual growth. Christians are to deny themselves for the purpose of evangelism and discipleship.

Paul stated a general principle in his aim not to give unnecessary offense to the lost or saved by saying, “I also try to please all people in all things.” This statement must not be taken out of context. He was not promoting a situational ethic in which we go along with whatever crowd we happen to be in. He was not saying that he allowed the expectations of others to always control his decisions. He specifically was saying that he denied himself (“my own profit”) for the profit of many. Paul’s desire was to do nothing that would hinder anyone from being saved. If it meant self-denial, he gladly yielded what pleasure he may have gained for the sake of gaining a better hearing for the gospel.

Hebrews 10:23-25

10:23. For the writer of Hebrews, a commitment to Christ included a commitment to His church. The writer offered three strong exhortations to his readers in 10:22-24, each beginning let us. The first exhortation was to draw near to God. The second was to hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering. We might have expected an encouragement to confess our faith, rather than hope, since the author would move on soon to the great faith chapter (Heb. 11). Hope, however, was also a major concern for this author. Our “confession” is a profession of belief rather than confession of sins. We should hold on to our confession without wavering. The reason our confession can be so consistent is that we trust the God who is faithful to keep His promises. The Bible often testifies to God’s faithfulness (1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13). Unlike the pagan gods of the ancient world, God is faithful and consistent in His character. We can trust Him because He is trustworthy.

10:24. The third exhortation is be concerned about one another. Our concern for one another has, according to the author of Hebrews, a specific focus. We

should promote love and good works. He would not be satisfied with a feel-good type of concern. Our concern for one another should produce more loving attitudes in the church and good deeds. The author devoted chapter 11 to some heroes and heroines of faith; they could serve as role models for Christian behavior. Later in the book the author pointed to our imitating mature Christian leaders (13:7). Above all, the book highlights Jesus as our inspiration for living the Christian life. The author also encouraged his readers to meet together. Some of his original readers might have been worried about persecution if they identified too much with the church.

10:25. The author added another motivation for Christian meeting together. He saw the day drawing near. He did not specify exactly what “day” he had in mind, but generally scholars see this as a reference to the return of Christ.

Nehemiah 8:1-18

8:3. It is not stated why Ezra chose to have this assembly and reading of the Law at the Water Gate rather than at the temple. Some speculate that tension between Nehemiah and the priests, some of whom were allied with Tobiah the Ammonite (6:17-19), may have encouraged Ezra and Nehemiah to have the meeting away from the temple complex. It is possible that the size of the crowd demanded a different location. Exactly what made up the book of the law has been the subject of intense discussion. Probably Ezra read the legal sections of a Pentateuch that was virtually identical to what we have today. It does not say that he read it in its entirety, but that he read out of it.

8:4. The term “platform” normally means “tower,” but it is used to designate a platform here and in 2 Chron. 6:13. Little is known about the men who stood on his right and his left. Usually in Ezra-Nehemiah priests and Levites are distinguished from the “laity,” so these people probably were prominent lay leaders, such as representatives from the elders or heads of families.

8:5. The phrase “Ezra opened the book” is a little anachronistic since the book did not appear until the Christian era. Literally the phrase is, “Ezra unrolled the scroll.” The apostle Paul specifically instructed that “Until I come, give your attention to public reading, exhortation, and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13).

8:6. Worship for the people was not just a mental exercise, but it involved the whole worshiper, who stood, spoke, and knelt in humility before God.

8:7. Many of the 13 Levites who assisted Ezra were involved in the covenant renewal described in the following chapters. Eight of the 13 took part in the public confession (9:3-5), and nine are listed as signers of the covenant (10:9-13).

8:9. This verse is important because it links the ministries of Nehemiah and Ezra. Many critical scholars regard the mention of these great leaders together as an anachronistic attempt to link together the ministries of two men who, according to these scholars, were not contemporaries. Yet there are no insurmountable problems, either textually or historically, that preclude the historicity of this event. Admittedly it seems odd that Nehemiah makes no mention of Ezra, a man of such prominence, until this point in the narrative. This does not necessarily mean that Ezra was not there. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries who both prophesied to the people of Jerusalem and Judah, yet neither mentions the other. Here the author clearly attests to a joint ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, who participated together in the covenant renewal (chaps. 8–10) and took part together in the great procession and dedication of the walls of Jerusalem (12:27-43).

The command, “Do not mourn or weep,” seems baffling since the leaders would have been encouraged by the contrition and repentance of the people. However, this dedication of the wall occurred on the “first day of the seventh month” (v. 2) during the New Year celebration. The feast days were to be days of joy (Lev. 23:24; Deut. 12:12; 16:11), not mourning.

8:10. Rather than mourning, the people were commanded to go and “eat what is rich, drink what is sweet.” The term “rich” translates a Hebrew word found in the Old Testament only here in this verse but clearly related to the verb “to make fat, to be fat.” It refers to choice foods appropriate for a celebration. The “sweet” drink mentioned here may have been wine mixed with honey, a popular drink long before the time of Christ. The people were to stop grieving because their strength came from the joy of the Lord. True security was found in Yahweh alone.

8:13. It is clear from the following context (v. 15) that most of the people returned to their homes after Ezra’s reading of the law. It was harvest time, and there was much work to be done. However, many of the leaders remained in Jerusalem to study the words of the law and its implications.

8:14-15. The Festival of Booths is mentioned in four books of the law (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:39-43; Num. 29:12-38; Deut. 16:13-15). It was an eight-day agricultural festival that began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, during the grain and grape harvest (Deut. 16:13). The legislation in Leviticus 23:39-43 is unique in two respects: (1) only in this passage are the Israelites commanded to dwell in a booth for the seven days of the feast, and (2) only in this passage is their dwelling in booths given a theological connection, “so that your generations may know that I made the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Lev. 23:43).

Since the celebration of the Festival of Booths required preparation, the leaders studying the law with Ezra spread this news throughout their towns and in Jerusalem. No passage in the Old Testament expressly states the requirement to gather branches from olive and myrtle trees for the construction of booths. This seems to be an explanation and application of the command of Lev. 23:40 to gather from “majestic trees—palm fronds, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook.”

8:16. Those living in Jerusalem erected their booths “on... their rooftops,” because most homes had flat roofs. Those who came from outside Jerusalem used whatever space was available, such as the square by the Water Gate, where they had read the law two weeks before, or in the square by the Gate of Ephraim. The Gate of Ephraim is not mentioned in the detailed description of the wall in chapter 3. However, its description in 2 Kings 14:13 suggests it was on the north side of the wall. Thus, both locations provided easy access to the temple complex.

8:17. The celebration of the Festival of Booths was even more significant because the people had not celebrated like this from the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day. What made the present celebration different was likely the spiritual and theological emphasis that pervaded it. While earlier celebrations may have focused on the harvest and thanksgiving aspects, this observance under Ezra returned to its theological underpinnings to recall God’s provision and care during their forefathers’ flight from Egypt, just as the people in Nehemiah’s time rejoiced in God’s care and provision for them in their flight from Babylon.

The author of Ezra-Nehemiah described well the experience of the people at the festival: there was tremendous joy. Critics have sometimes unfairly

stigmatized Ezra-Nehemiah as banal, lifeless, or legalistic, but repeatedly this book emphasizes the joy that comes from living in covenant relationship with the God of Israel.