

E = Exalting God in Worship

Luke 9:51-62

INTRODUCTION

This has been a long and destructive week in our world, hasn't it? Like many of you, I have been paying close attention to the news about our country's intervention into the tensions between Iran and our ally the nation of Israel, and how it is all impacting our nation as well. And, like you, I have been in serious prayer about the safety of our military personnel stationed in that region.

There was one headline in particular that caught my attention this week. It read:

Medics responding to reports of ballistic missile impact in Ashdod

Ashdod is the 6th largest city in the nation of Israel, located in the southern portion of the country. About 60% of the Israel's imports come into that country through the port of Ashdod. So it is a very important commercial center. If you want to cripple any nation, you try to take out a port city like that.

But why would that headline stand out above all the others, you ask?

- If you are reading along with me through the Old Testament, about three weeks ago you read a story, recorded in 1 Samuel 5, about an event that took place in the city of Ashdod ... probably 3000 years ago.

For the benefit of everyone present, let me read that brief story to you this morning:

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from (the city of) Ebenezer (which was controlled by the nation of Israel) to (the city of) Ashdod (one of the major cities of the Philistines). They carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon.

Now, as an aside, they did that to illustrate that Dagon was the most powerful god and that the God of Israel was now bowing at the feet of Dagon. I continue to read:

When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold. (1 Samuel 5:1-5)

Dagon was a god worshipped all throughout that region of the world in those days.

- He was a very popular deity, who had temples in other major cities, too.
- He was regarded by those who worshipped him as the "father of gods."
- He was thought by them to be the lord of the land, and the god of prosperity.

- Kings and other rulers believed they were in power because Dagon chose them.
- There was, they believed, no god higher than Dagon.

So it was quite distressing to the Philistines to come into their temple one morning to find that Dagon had bowed down before the God of Israel, not the other way around.

- Thinking it must have been a coincidence, they stood the statue of Dagon back on its feet, only for it to fall again.
- In this second fall, Dagon's head and hands broke off.
- The Biblical interpretation is that even Dagon knew that the God of Israel was greater than he.

Dagon learned what the Psalmist proclaimed when he wrote:

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.
(Psalm 145:3)

Near the end of his life King David proclaimed:

There is no one like you, Lord, and there is no God but you, (1 Chronicles 17:20)

This month we have been reacquainting you with our church's approach to fulfilling the Great Commission's mandate to "make disciples."

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

We call our approach ...

Growing in G.R.A.C.E.

We have identified the first three letters over the last four Sundays:

- G = Growing in God's Word
- R = Re-telling Your Faith Story
- A = Applying Your Spiritual Gifts
- C = Cultivating Accountable Relationships

This week we wrap up this discipleship series with the letter "E," which stands for "Exalting God in Worship."

- Our discipleship process seeks to move you deeper into an understanding of the greatness of God so that you bow in His presence.
- The goal is NOT that you fall down and break your arms off, but the deeper you grow in G.R.A.C.E. the greater should be your awareness of and appreciation for how awesome God is.

In the Bible ...

- the Hebrew word translated as “worship” is *shachah* (pronounced “shah kah”) and literally denotes the act of bowing down.
- The Greek word *proskuneō*, (pronounced “pros q neigh o”) rendered as “worship,” means “to encounter God and praise Him.”
- Put together they describe more than just an action or activity, but as a Both terms seem to define worship as an activity or an action.

Worship is an inward posture of the heart that is always bowed down in humble, awe-filled recognition of God’s worthiness, honoring and revering Him at all times as the supreme authority over one’s life. (Warren Wiersbe)

This was a major topic for Martin Luther, because he saw that worship services were being focused on human people and rituals, not on God. So he wrote and taught:

Consequently the true worship of God is to kiss this Son, that is, to adore Him in such a way that you see nothing in heaven and earth aside from Him and believe in nothing else than Him. (Martin Luther)

As human beings, we were created to worship. That’s our sole reason for existing. God says:

I have made them for my glory. (Isaiah 43:70)

Worship cannot be defined solely by physical observances because true biblical worship is centered on God and His unparalleled greatness. It’s not simply singing, playing an instrument, lifting hands in praise, confessing, and bowing down. These acts are all elements of worship but not the totality of it.

Jesus told the Pharisees and scribes they were like the people in Isaiah’s day who honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. He quoted Isaiah 29:13 to them

These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught. (Isaiah 29:13)

According to Jesus, such worship was a farce. True worship can only come from a heart that has been redeemed and in right relationship with God.

So how do disciples of Jesus worship? There are both corporate and personal dimensions:

#1: CORPORATELY: DISCIPLES ATTEND WORSHIP SERVICES

It should be no surprise that the very first practice of discipleship in this area is regular attendance at the worship services of the church.

The Scriptures clearly communicate the importance of CORPORATE worship to the development of our spiritual lives. It is in CORPORATE worship that ...

- We hear God's Word proclaimed
- We share in the Sacraments
- We experience the joy of being a part of the family of God and discover how important we are in the spiritual growth of those around us

The world competes mightily with this discipleship practice, doesn't it?

- That alone ought to tell us how important it is!
- The devil doesn't want us in church, so he creates many ways for us to avoid it because he knows that our consistent, weekly connection to our church keeps our faith alive and vital.

So first and foremost, disciples come together with other members of the Body of Christ to CORPORATELY express the glory of God.

#2: PRIVATELY: DISCIPLES PRAY

Secondly, disciples pray, working hard to develop a consistent and meaningful prayer life. Now, it is true that we pray when we gather corporately, but you need to pray when you are by yourself, too.

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:6)

It is in prayer that we enjoy the most intimacy with God our Father, an intimacy that can be achieved in no other way.

- Our reading of the Scripture is important, as is our corporate worship, but just as talking with your spouse or friend develops closeness and oneness so too talking with God brings us close to Him.

In prayer we are able to share our needs and listen for His direction for our lives.

To help develop this dimension of discipleship, Grace offers specifically designed prayer services regularly throughout the year and provides educational opportunities, such as our "Transforming Prayer" course, to help develop these skills.

#3: CORPORATELY AND PRIVATELY: DISCIPLES PRACTICE THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Third, disciples practice spiritual disciplines.

This is perhaps one of the least implemented elements of discipleship in Christianity world-wide, perhaps because the mere mention of them evokes a sense of mystery or images of the saints of old. But there is no need to recoil from the idea!

Spiritual disciplines are merely practices that help you focus your attention on God. Depending on who you read, there are between 7 and 15 different disciplines, all of which can have meaning to your particular situation. I

- I use a list of 12 from Richard Foster's classic book "Celebration of Discipline."
- Some of the most common are fasting, meditation, journaling, and maintaining periods of silence.
- Some of the disciplines are used for short durations of time – like fasting.
- Others may become habits that last a lifetime – like journaling.

To learn more about this area of faith, watch for our courses on the spiritual disciplines.

APPLICATION

Robert E. Webber, not to be confused with the famous actor by the same name, was one of the top speakers and writers in the area of worship and a professor at Wheaton College. He summed up this part of our Discipleship Pathway like this:

We need to let go of our intellectual idea of worship and realize there is more to worship than a sermon;

- we have to let go of our evangelistic notion of worship and reckon with the fact that worship is not primarily directed toward the sinners who need to be converted;
- we must let go of our entertainment expectations and remind ourselves that we are not in church to watch a Christian variety show.
- We have gathered together in worship to be met by God the Almighty. God, the Creator of the Universe, the One who sustains our lives, our Redeemer and King, is present through proclamation and remembrance.
 - He wants to communicate to us, to penetrate our inner self, to take up residence within us.
- And, as we go through the experience of meeting with him in this mystical moment of public worship, we are to respond.
- But response is not just singing a hymn, not just saying a creed, not just saying a prayer.
 - Response, from the very beginning of worship to the end, must be a powerful inner experience of actually being in the presence of God. When we sing a hymn or say a confession or prayer, we are not singing or saying words, but expressing a feeling, bringing our souls, truly responding and communicating to the living and active presence of a loving and merciful God.

Keep growing in G.R.A.C.E.!

Amen.