

The Purpose of Religion

- I'm afraid that in many people's minds the perfect religion is one that allows you access to God, *without having to bother with other people*
- On the contrary, I'd like to show this morning that one of the main purposes of religion is to put us together with other people...
 - To put us in a position where we HAVE TO "bother" with others
- It's a fundamental misunderstanding of religion that leads to this belief
- I've found an interesting quote, that speaks to this misunderstanding:

"Because the root of a solid spiritual life is embedded in a relationship between people and God, it is easy to develop the misunderstanding that your spiritual life is only something personal between God and yourself. We start to think that it is a private thing, that needs to be nurtured by prayers and singing, spiritual readings that comfort and inspire, and worship with like-minded friends. If we think this way for very long, we can begin to assume that the way we treat the people we don't like (or who don't like us) has nothing to do with God." – The Message, Page 542

- Why did God chose to have us worship Him in groups?
 - And it clearly was his decision to do so...
- From the very beginning it was so
- Genesis 2:18 (KJV)
 - 18) And the LORD God said, *It is* not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.
- When God set the rules for organized worship under the Law of Moses, he didn't set it up for us to worship alone

- The temple was the center of the religious life, and all men came together at the temple to pray and sacrifice

- And in the New Testament, God continued the same pattern with His teaching through Paul and the apostles

- Hebrews 10:23-25 (KJV)

- 23) Let us hold fast the profession of *our* faith without wavering; (for he *is* faithful that promised;)

- 24) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:

- 25) Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting *one another*: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

- If God had thought it best for us, he could have established a system of religion where we are simply to form a personal relationship with Him, and don't have to have any interaction or connectivity with others...

- **But, He didn't**

- Why did God chose to have us worship Him with other people?

- I'd like to talk about three possible reasons this morning

- The first isn't pretty...

- God has put us together to **TEST US**

- It's not very romantic, it's not very awe-inspiring...

- But, I'm afraid that it's true

- People are very hard to live with at times

- I know this is true, because I am one of them

- Oddly enough, God didn't seem to call a group of people together that have very compatible personality types

- God calls all different kinds of people, from every station of life

- He does so specifically to Test us...

- To Try us...

- To tumble us together in this large group, bouncing and bumping off of each other until we wear off **OUR OWN** rough edges
- It's not our job, necessarily to wear off the rough edges of the people around us...
- We are to be concerned with how **WE** come out of this process
- So many times, it really isn't important **WHAT** the issue is that is rubbing up against us...
- What matters is how we react to it...
- How we shape and change and modify our characters, our personalities to be more spiritual, more Godly in the process
- Proverbs 27:17 (KJV)
 - 17) Iron sharpeneth iron; So a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.
- This verse is often spoken of in a very high-minded, academic way...
 - Often used to explain the beneficial effects of a heated discussion of Scripture
- But, consider the process here... Iron sharpening Iron
- Nothing about this is pleasant
 - This is hot, sharp, rough hard objects being hammered and scraped together
 - This is sparks flying as small pieces of your hardened core are broken off and you are reshaped, reformed, into something that you are not naturally
- I'm not saying that the purpose that God put us together is to argue...
 - We have much other spiritual guidance in how to keep our communication pure with one another
- I'm bringing this up to show that simply the process of living, worshipping, and sharing our lives together in this home we call an Ecclesia, can be hard and bothersome

- But it is supposed to be this way, so that we can become better people
- You are put here with people that you have a hard time being around, specifically for the purpose of learning how to live with them
- For us to learn patience, humility, beneficial concern, and love...
 - We have to be given the opportunity to do so
 - We have to be tested...
- The second reason why God chose to have us be with other people and not to go through life on our own is because He wanted to **HELP US**
 - More specifically, He wants to teach us that we need the help of others
- When God spoke of Adam, He said:
- Genesis 2:18 (NIV)
 - 18) **“It is not good for man to be alone.** I will make a helper suitable for him.”
- It is not good for man to be alone...
 - We need help
- This principle is true in our spiritual lives, as well as our natural lives
- We all have a natural, hormonal yearning that causes us to pursue a mate
- We need to develop a keen spiritual sense, that causes us to realize that we need “helpers suitable to us”
- Christ is our ultimate help...
 - We all have realized that we can’t make it in this world on our own
 - The reason we are all here to remember this sacrifice made on our behalf is because we acknowledge that we are doomed without it
 - Outside of the grace, mercy and forgiveness found on this table, we are all incapable of earning salvation by the strength of our own merits

- We have realized that, and we come here, take of his body and his blood and are saved by it
- God has put us together with other believers, because He wants us to learn this same lesson
- He knows our frailty and our weaknesses...
- He wants us to be smart enough to reach out to others in our times of need
 - He wants us to learn to swallow our pride, and the false-front we put up of “doing well”, and to ask our Brothers and Sisters to help us
- James 5:13-16 (KJV)
 - 13) Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms.
 - 14) Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:
 - 15) And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.
 - 16) Confess *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.
- Instead of being so concerned about what others think of us...
 - Instead of being concerned about keeping up a certain image...
- God wants us to realize that we are **ALL** sinners
 - We all fall, and are weak and need help
 - We are put together in this Ecclesia so that we can receive the help that we need
- The last reason I would like to share with you this morning, about why I think that God has organized us to worship Him in groups is very closely related to the last reason...
 - To **HELP OTHERS**
- But, not just for the same reasons that I already gave you...
- I honestly see it as two different and distinct things...

- It takes a lot of spiritual growth and maturity to be able to ask others for help
- I find it quite amazing that one of the fastest paths we have been shown to spiritual growth and maturity is in the service of others
- In turning to selfless pursuits, and dedicating ourselves to helping others, we really begin to grow
- But, of course, there is another reason...
 - It's commanded of us:
- Galatians 6:1-2 (KJV)
 - 1) Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.
 - 2) Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.
- Sure, it's beneficial to us personally...
 - Sure we grow through spiritual service to others...
- But, regardless of that...
 - **We are commanded to do it!**
- When we bear one another's burdens we fulfill the law of Christ
 - To love one another
- John 15:12-14 (KJV)
 - 12) This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.
 - 13) Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.
 - 14) Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.
- God has established that we worship him in groups, because it helps us to fulfill the commandment we have to bear one another's burdens
- God has established that we worship him in groups, in order to test us, to try us, to make us into better people

- And God has established that we worship him in groups, to learn to set aside our pride and to accept the help of our Brothers and Sisters
- So you see, no religion could be perfect if it allowed you access to God, *without having to bother with other people*
 - Because in a very real sense...
 - Religion is all about how we react to other people
- Our relationship with Christ is intricately connected with how we treat others
- You all familiar with the exchange between Christ and the righteous at the judgment...
- Matthew 25:37-40 (KJV)
 - 37) Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed *thee*? or thirsty, and gave *thee* drink?
 - 38) When saw we thee a stranger, and took *thee* in? or naked, and clothed *thee*?
 - 39) Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?
 - 40) And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, **Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me.**
- Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the **LEAST** of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me
- **ALL** of our Brothers and Sisters are needed if we want to get the full effect of what God has planned for us in an Ecclesia
 - They are there to **TEST US**
 - They are there to **HELP US** out
 - They are there for us to **HELP THEM**
- As we turn our attention now to this bread and wine, we remember that Jesus said that it was “with desire” that that he had desired to eat the Passover with his disciples
- He didn’t want to be alone before he suffered, he wanted to have his disciples around him
- Even the least of the disciples... Even Judas... Even ME!