

The Discipleship Project-Summer 2017

Series 2: Developing Spiritual Disciplines

A series by Seth Simmons

Series Big Idea: Because we have been called into covenant, we have the privilege of deepening our relationship with Jesus Christ through spiritual disciplines.

Lesson 2.4: The Privilege of Faithful Worship

Lesson Big Idea: Because we have been called into covenant, we should exercise our privilege of corporate worship.

FOUNDATION

Scripture Focus: Hebrews 10:25 (PPT)

It all started when my family and I were in Jerusalem for Pentecost. All of a sudden over a hundred people were in the street dancing, weeping tears of joy, and praising God in different languages including our native Phrygian language! We were confused because they were simple Galileans, and, if you know Galileans, they are not known for being fluent in many other languages. Someone spoke up and said they were drunk, and we all laughed.

Then one of their leaders, I think his name was Peter, stood up and started talking about what was going on. We were all deeply moved by his words, and in the end we realized that Jesus Christ, the man we had watched be crucified a few weeks earlier, was Master and Messiah. Then Peter spoke up again, “Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins can be forgiven, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children, for everyone.” (See Acts 2:38–39.) That day my family was a part of the three thousand who obeyed his words. We were baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit just like those crazy Galileans! What joy!

Life after receiving the Spirit was beautiful. All I can say is that I had never been part of a community like that before, not in my Synagogue or even with my own family. We were continually in awe of the miraculous works of God, and we were committed to what the apostles taught us. There was no division early on, only unity. Every day we would worship in the Temple and then meet in each other’s homes to pray and talk more about what God was doing, while sharing a meal together. I think the joy and laughter is what I remember most.

And when we found out that some of our brothers and sisters were in need, we all pulled together and took care of them. No one looked out just for their own interests. Everyone was living and working together in remarkable harmony, and every day, by the grace of Jesus Christ, more and more people would join the way.

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one

another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24–25, NIV).

FRAME

It is important for us to worship together in community. (PPT) (PDG) In Leviticus, God commanded that the Israelites share in His “otherness,” consecrating themselves and making themselves holy, separate from other nations, and worshiping Him alone. This is what it meant to be a saint—a holy one, set apart, “living according to the revealed character of God” (Hooker and Young, *Holiness and Mission: Learning from the Early Church about Mission in the City*). What is unique about this call to be saints, though, is that the call was not to individuals. It was a call to the whole nation of Israel. **From the beginning, covenant worship was a call to a community.**

Accordingly, the New Testament church was often referred to as the “people of God.” They were an extension of the story of the Old Testament. The apostle Peter, for example, proclaimed that the church was the direct fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the people of Israel. (See I Peter 2:9.) Interestingly, in Acts 7:38 and Hebrews 2:12, as Ken Gurley points out, the word used to describe the assembly of the Israelites in the wilderness is *ecclesia*, which would become the term used for the church in the New Covenant (*Doctrines of the Bible*).

When we go back to the formation of the church in the Acts narrative, we discover that first-century believers were first known as members of “the Way” (Acts 9:2, NKJV), (PPT) and in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). (PPT) However, later on the new community of believers became known as *ecclesia*—“a called-out assembly or body of people” (*Doctrines of the Bible*).

On its face this seems like unusual terminology for the New Covenant community because, as Craig Van Gelder points out, “One might have expected these early disciples to draw on their Jewish heritage by calling their new community something like a Christian synagogue. But the inclusive character of the church probably influenced the choice of terms. Uncircumcised Gentiles were not welcome in the synagogue. *Ecclesia* represented a more acceptable description; in the Hellenistic world, it was used to describe a political gathering, an official meeting of an assembly of citizens” (*The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*). There was an intentional effort for the church to be inclusive and reflect the new diversity of the body of Christ as the Spirit was being poured out on all people. **The church was about the needs of the community over the preferential desires of a few individuals.**

No longer are we defined by our individual racial, ethnic, national, or political divisions. Instead, **the identity of the church is united together as the “people of God.”** (PPT) (PDG) The church is made up of all people. (See Romans 9:25–26.) (PPT) We are a diverse people united by the blood of Jesus Christ, and the church is to live in the world as a newly created international people of God from “every nation” (Revelation 7:9-10, 14, NIV).

Being a part of the New Covenant community, then, is about the benefits of the body over the personal preferences of the individual. In fact, the biblical descriptions of the church do not focus on individual Christians, but on the new community that has been created by the Holy Spirit. Many New Testament images, for example, further underscore this point: temple of God (I Corinthians 3:16); citizens with the saints, household of God (Ephesians 2:19); living stones built into a spiritual house (I Peter 2:5). “Biblical holiness,” as John Wesley aptly noted, “is essentially *social* holiness: it concerns the whole community” (Timothy Tennent, *Awakening Holiness: A Call to the 21st Century Church*). **We were created for the privilege of worshiping God in community, and this privilege is realized through corporate worship in our local called-out assembly.**

- **How do you think our North American focus on self and individualism gets in the way of being faithful to our worship community?**
- **What else may keep us from experiencing the blessedness of corporate worship?**

Worship involves fellowship with our brothers and sisters. The term *communion*—which refers to what we share in common—is probably better known as “fellowship.” The church as a communion, or fellowship, of saints means that we now experience God and each other in reconciled relationships based on what we share in common in Christ. As Jesus said, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35, NKJV). **(PPT) We glorify God when we love one another. (PPT) (PDG)**

Interestingly, “saints” became the apostle Paul’s favorite name for Christians throughout his letters to the church (*Holiness and Mission*). (See also Romans 1:7; 8:27; 12:13; 15:25, 26, 31; 16:2, 15; plus many other places in Paul’s letters for further reference.) We are now truly members of God’s people, and that is why Paul addresses us as “saints” or “holy ones,” the term once used for the people of Israel. “The language he uses reminds us of that fundamental relationship between Christ and believers, and of the call to be holy, in a way that our modern use of the term ‘Christians’ does not” (*Holiness and Mission*).

A common misunderstanding of a saint is a person who is recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness that is not attainable by the average believer. Biblically, though, *saint* is simply another term for Christ’s holy sanctified one—a worshiper of Christ. God’s command to the people of Israel to “be holy as I am holy” is now addressed to Christians as a command to be like Christ and worship Him in spirit and in truth. When we are invited into community, we respond to the gospel and are baptized into Jesus Christ. We die to our old way of life and are raised to a new one—a life that is lived “in Christ.”

Referring to the church community as “saints” (emphasizing the final *s*) also reminds us of the call for the whole worship community to live in holiness. When Paul wrote to

the Philippians, he encouraged them to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12–13, NKJV). (PPT) Again, he was writing to a collective “you,” not individuals. To “work out your own salvation” meant to live out the gospel as a community. We are to be “one in spirit and of one mind” as he encourages earlier in this passage (Philippians 2:2, NIV).

As a community of saints, we no longer live according to the desires of our ignorant, sinful nature, because we are not ignorant. We recognize the destroying effects of sin on ourselves and our brothers and sisters in our worship community. This, of course, does not mean that we are perfect, but it does mean that we are aware of the realities of sin. As one author aptly noted, “Even sanctified people sin, but the difference is that in the life of a sanctified person, sin becomes your permanent enemy, not your secret lover” (*Awakening Holiness*)!

We understand that sin not only impedes our individual worship with Jesus Christ, but sin will also affect our worship community. Sin is rarely controlled or isolated to individuals. It often involves consequences that have ramifications that go beyond what the individual ever considered. It is only by the grace of Jesus Christ that we can overcome it together. In the Acts narrative, as David deSilva notes, “Conversion to faith in Jesus meant joining a community of Christ followers and growing into Christian maturity by means of constant association with and mutual sharpening of other believers (Acts 2:44, 46–47)” (*An Introduction to the New Testament*). Perhaps this is why James instructed us to, “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16, NKJV). (PPT)

Therefore, we no longer live as sinners. Instead, **we live in our new identity as saints, worshiping God in the communion of the saints.** We follow the admonition of the apostle Paul, “In view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1, NIV).

- **Have you considered yourself or others as “saints”? Why or why not?**
- **How do you think holiness relates to a life of worship in community?**
- **Have you ever thought of how sin can affect our church community? Explain.**
- **Do you have a trusted spiritual mentor to whom you can confess your sins and pray with as James instructed?**
- **How do you believe a trusting relationship like that can help us become better worshipers?**

“**The church,**” as Timothy Tennent aptly noted, “**is what God is building in the world.** Jesus Christ is the foundation, and He is building His Church. Some of you have been hurt by the Church or discouraged about your experience with the Church, but the

Church is what God is building in the world. Allow Him to restore your vision for the Church because there is no true access to His holy presence without your brothers and sisters” (*Awakening Holiness*).

We are the church—the called-out community of God’s people—and the place where the Spirit of God dwells. “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are” (I Corinthians 3:16–17, NKJV). Once again Paul’s emphasis is not on “you” singular, but “you” plural. Together we are the temple.

Indeed, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. . . . he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:24, 27–28, NIV). The church community—the community where we have restored fellowship with our Creator—is the dwelling place He has chosen to reveal Himself. The Holy of Holies is now where God’s people are gathered in His name. When we come together for corporate worship, we cultivate an optimal opportunity for people to be reconciled in fellowship with their Creator.

In the Old Covenant, God’s desire was for the people of Israel to worship Him and be a witness of God’s love to the Gentile nations around them. Isaiah proclaimed that God’s grace did not stop with Israel, but extended to the whole human race. (See Isaiah 42:6; 49:6.) They were to be God’s representatives on earth.

Where Israel failed, the church fulfills today. (PPT) (PDG) Through the infilling of the Spirit, God has created a fellowship of saints, a church community that demonstrates to the world “the truthfulness of the gospel of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation . . . [we are the] people of God . . . created by the Spirit to live as a missionary community” (Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*).

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:17–19, NKJV). (PPT)

When we live a life of worship unto God with our church community, we shine the hope of reconciliation to everyone around us. (PPT) (PDG) Indeed, what a privilege it is to worship in covenant community.

- **We have beautiful times of worship during our individual times of worship, but what differences have you noticed between private devotion and corporate worship with your church community?**
- **How do you think corporate worship inspires others to experience reconciliation?**

- **How does the opportunity to be a minister of reconciliation inspire your worship?**

FINISH

Frankie Davis-Simmons lived in Menard, a small midwest Texas town about two-and-a-half hours west of Austin, with a population of 1,412.

For years she was one of the only people in her town who faithfully lived out the Apostolic message. She longed to be a part of an Apostolic church community. From time to time the occasional itinerant preacher would come through and hold services before leaving for the next town, but most of the time she would have to travel a great distance on a limited budget to attend a worship service. Or, she would hold a make-shift church service in her small home with her three children. It became so difficult for her that she prayed for God to move her family. But God told her that He wanted her in Menard. So, she stayed and prayed for God to send an Apostolic preacher to her town to start a church.

Years passed and still no church. Then, toward the end of her life, after her children had grown, God answered her prayer. He sent her son-in-law and daughter to her town to start a church. There were only a handful of people most of the time, but, oh, how she adored her little church community. She would show up early for prayer, teach Sunday school to the little ones, help with accounting, and invite town members to join them. Her heart was overjoyed. She worshiped faithfully in her church every opportunity she had until she passed over to her eternal reward.

At her funeral, there was standing room only at the little country church. Guests who had come to pay their respects spilled into the foyer and out into the street. One by one they shared story after story of how Frankie had impacted their lives through her example of prayer, service, and worship. (And her cooking as well, of course.) This faithful, little lady left an indelible mark on her community because of her relentless determination to live a life of worship as an Apostolic witness in her community.

The life of Frankie Davis-Simmons is a beautiful example of the privilege of worship that we have in covenant community. So in closing, brothers and sisters, “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24–25, NKJV).