

## The Courts Of The Lord

Text: 1 Cor 11:26

Suggested Hymns:

249, 505, 504, 433, 511

1) The Barriers To Worship

2) The Dynamic In Worship

3) The Fruits Of Worship

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Psalm 84:1-2, 9-12, *How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! <sup>2</sup> My soul longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. ... <sup>9</sup> O God, behold our shield, And look upon the face of Your anointed. <sup>10</sup> For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand [elsewhere]. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness. <sup>11</sup> For the LORD God is a sun and shield; The LORD will give grace and glory; No good thing will He withhold From those who walk uprightly. <sup>12</sup> O LORD of hosts, Blessed is the man who trusts in You!* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Worship is not primarily something we do; it is something God does. In the minds of many people the term “Church Service” seems to suggest that what people do during Sunday Worship is a service to God, as if we were doing Him a favour when we enter into His courts.

We do God no favours. He is the One who favours us. The Service is something He performs. During Christian worship God is the Giver. In worship God is the Centre of the action. A Christian church is not our house but God’s house. The Lessons are not the preacher’s words but God’s Word. The Holy Eucharist is not the Christian’s supper but the Lord’s Supper. We are not performing a good work just because we listen to a sermon or attend Holy Communion.

The good work is the Spirit of God reaching into our lives through a Word that is both audible and visible. That is why the psalmist announces in the Introit for this Sunday, *How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! <sup>2</sup> My soul*

*longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the Lord.* The Psalmist was driven to the courts of the Lord, where God was communicating Himself. He came not because he wanted to impress God or other people, but because he wanted God to press a gift into his heart — the gift of His Holy Spirit.

The psalmist knew that his life depended on receiving something from God. That is what worship meant to him.

In a sense it is not wrong to think of worship as service to God, but the highest service to God, the prime and essential activity of Christian worship, is to receive gifts from Him. Divine Service, Divine Worship is receiving the free gift of grace from God. It is a refusal of divine worship to try to offer to God gifts and services that are intended to merit His favour.

It is a natural tendency with man to turn a gift into a wage and insist on earning it, instead of simply receiving it and rejoicing in it. We may feel at times that God blesses us in worship because we have enough determination to attend the Church Service.

And it happens again and again that we look upon the liturgy and the forms as ends in themselves as our duty for the day. Instead, it is the means to God's purpose — the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Our sin is that we tend to reduce Christian worship to the level of a good work and replace God's grace with our merit. All of this reveals a spiritual pride where a longing and even a fainting for the Spirit of God is absent.

However, when God gets through to us in the forms of worship, the Word and Sacrament, we are changed, and there is no longer a place for pride, but rather only praise! So let us consider today *The Courts of the Lord*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

## **1. The Barriers To Worship**

### **Self-Satisfaction**

The Kyrie, "*Lord, have mercy on us,*" coming in the centre of our liturgy, is a prayer of the church for help and deliverance. It is a prayer for forgiveness, because even in the midst of worship we need to cry out for mercy.

One might suppose that when we are worshipping God, this is one time when we need, least of all, forgiveness of sins. But there is probably no other time when we need it more!

We may have erected barriers to worship. For instance, a feeling of self-satisfaction may sweep over us when we engage in worship. We are pleased with ourselves that we manage, in spite of the late activities the night before and preparing the family for church on any given Sunday, to be present for worship. Perhaps we even passed up an invitation to golf! We look upon our worship as deserving of attention and a reward.

### **Sluggishness**

Then, a sluggishness of body and soul occasionally creeps over us at this time. Not realising that perhaps the activities of the night before were not at all conducive to a fruitful reception of God's gifts, we are lethargic in our singing, in our praying, and our whole participation in the liturgy becomes a burden instead of a joy. Weakened, we succumb to distractions and a mechanical mouthing of hymns and prayers. "*Lord, have mercy upon us!*"

We have sinned by the polite matter-of-factness with which, Sunday after Sunday, we can listen to the mighty acts of God for our salvation, but then leave Him, embalmed in our churches, instead of taking Him home alive, into our daily living, speaking, and doing.

### **Fear**

There is also a sense of fear or apprehension that sometimes comes over us when we worship. We are afraid of becoming too involved. We would rather be spectators to what is going on than participants. To get involved in the worship of the church is to dip our sinful selves into the immensity of God's love, and we are not inclined by nature to give ourselves up.

It is self that we want to preserve. In our sinful natures we are religious enough to acknowledge the existence of God, but rebellious enough to keep Him at a safe distance. All of this tends to go on within us because the flesh is opposed to the Spirit. And it occurs in our lives most when we think it happens least — in the courts of the Lord.

### **Idolatry**

Perhaps our greatest barrier to worship is our idolatrous practice of worshipping beauty instead of our beautiful Saviour, venerating forms instead of the Holy Spirit who uses them. The psalmist longed for the courts of the Lord, not because the courts of the Lord were beautiful, but because the beauty of the Lord was there.

The Lutheran Church has done a great deal to Christianise culture and to use the arts to support the Word, but as so often happens, good things in the hands of sinful men are sometimes used in the wrong way.

The “*courts of the Lord*” in which we worship, deserve to be built with the best architecture that is available, and our liturgies and hymns must be set to the best music that man is capable of writing. But these things dare never become the objects of our worship.

The lines in the architecture of a church must always lead away from us to the God who is above us and centre upon the God who is with us with His grace and forgiveness. The music we use must not entertain, but must serve the Word and support the proclamation of the Gospel.

### **Ritualism**

We cannot get along without forms in our worship, but we must never allow forms to get in the way of worship. The liturgy is a form that we have established to embody the proclamation of the Word, but to be more concerned about what we do than what God does is ritualism.

In the Lutheran Church we have built up a salutary emphasis on the Word as central. Ritualism invades our church if people simply sit it out and listen to the Word for the sake of listening rather than for the sake of having this Word take hold of their faith and life and change them to God’s ways.

Our flesh erects these barriers to worship, and even in the midst of worship we have need to pray: “*Lord, have mercy upon us!*”

## **2. The Dynamic In Worship**

### **The Holy Spirit and Inner Struggle**

Obviously, then, the success of worship cannot depend on what we do. What goes on in the courts of the Lord depends on the Holy Spirit. Even our longing and fainting for the courts of the Lord is a result of the Holy Spirit’s activity.

Thirsting for the presence of God and the refreshment of His Word is part of our inner struggle. We must understand, however, that this longing and fainting does not cause the Holy Spirit to enter our lives. Rather, it is in fact a result of the Holy Spirit's presence already in our lives.

The inner struggle, our daily consciousness that a battle is going on within us between the flesh and the Spirit, is evidence of our conversion. It is the Holy Spirit Himself living in our hearts that prompts us to seek the things of God. The person who experiences the struggle of living the Christian life will be driven to the courts of the Lord where the Holy Spirit works.

Fainting for the courts of the Lord is not a sign of weakness but of strength. There should be tension in our lives. Tension is a hated word in our culture, because for us tension means anxiety, ulcers and heart failure. This is the tension that results from refusing contact with God. This is not the tension the psalmist is thinking of.

What he means and what the apostle Paul means in Gal. 5, the Epistle for this Sunday,<sup>1</sup> is that in every Christian there is this incessant struggle of our sinful self pitted against the Spirit of God.

Is this kind of tension present in our lives? God pity us if you find it easy to be a Christian, if we have never experienced a soul-searching temptation, an agony of the spirit. God pity us if you are carried along in life with the stream instead of experiencing a struggle and triumph like that of a 'salmon shooting a waterfall!'

We as Christians are not always conscious enough that Christ dwells within us. Whenever there is a disturbance within, we usually interpret this is an indication that we are losing faith, and we fail to recognise that it is an indication that faith is very much alive.

In strict Lutheran tradition we have been taught that justification by faith is the chief doctrine of Christianity, and rightly so, but maybe we have stressed too much "Christ for us" and not enough "Christ in us."

We emphasise justification at the expense of sanctification. We think too much about birth and too little about growth. Conflict and tension means that the Holy Spirit is helping us conform to Jesus Christ. The fainting, the inner struggle within us, is the mark of a Spirit-created Christianity.

So, because the Holy Spirit dwells within us, we long for the courts of the Lord to be energised by His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. God the Holy Spirit is the dynamic in worship.

### **The Holy Spirit, Our Shield**

Here we are met with a most wonderful truth that the Holy Spirit leads us always for peace and power back to Himself — to the courts of the Lord. The psalmist believed that in the struggle against the evil in his life only God the Holy Spirit could deliver him.

There in the courts of the Lord he would find God as his Shield. The God who was a Shield for the psalmist is also the God whom the apostle Paul describes as a Shield in his Letter to the Ephesians.

Here God, our Shield, is the God who by His Spirit fits us with the whole armour of God, girding us with the truth, protecting us with the breastplate of righteousness, shoeing us with the equipment of the Gospel of peace, shielding us with faith and salvation and arming us with the sword of the Word.<sup>2</sup>

In our worship on this Sunday we address our God who, in the words of the Introit, shields us from Satan, strengthens us in time of temptation, and saves us from ourselves. In other words, it is the Holy Spirit who makes the redeeming work of Christ an ongoing power in our lives.

It should be clear to us, then, that in our worship in the courts of the Lord the Holy Spirit comes to our need. Thus the dynamic in worship is not something we generate. It is the Holy Spirit at work.

This means that worship is not primarily what we do, but what God does. What God has done for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ He bestows upon us by His Spirit. The creative activity of the Holy Spirit takes place only within the holy Christian church, through Word and Sacrament, and His one great purpose is to make us alive and strong in the forgiveness of sins.

There could be no greater benefit from worship than the forgiveness of sin, for God could give us no greater gift. Yes, a day in the courts of the Lord with the spiritual blessings of being forgiven and fortified is better than a thousand days elsewhere!

### **3. The Fruits Of Worship**

## **Thanksgiving, a Result of Conversion**

There was another reason why the psalmist was driven to the courts of the Lord. Although it is not mentioned in our text, it is found elsewhere in the Psalms. It is the response of thanksgiving.

The praise and thanksgiving that we bring before God in our worship is not the Pharisaical kind that thanks God because we are not like other people. It is rather the thanksgiving that grows out of the experience of becoming like Jesus Christ.

The Gospel for today<sup>3</sup> clearly shows us that genuine thanksgiving is the result of having been cleansed from the leprosy of sin and changed by the Holy Spirit. The nine healed lepers probably rushed home and told their families and friends how lucky they were, which is not thanksgiving.

The Samaritan returned to the source of his blessings, Jesus Christ. His thanksgiving was a result of the change that took place in his life, and that change went deeper than physical healing.

Thanksgiving is basic to our life and worship because the forgiveness of sins is a gift. Whenever the writers of the Psalms composed songs of thanksgiving and praise, they were acknowledging forgiveness as a gift rather than a reward.

The thanksgiving that they would make in the courts of the Lord was not to induce God to grant further blessings but was a result of the blessings they had already received.

## **Thanksgiving in Word and Sacrament**

The courts of the Lord are one place where we respond with our thanksgiving. We do this, for example, through our celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Eucharist means thanksgiving. The Samaritan's thanksgiving was a kind of eucharist because it was a fruit of the Holy Spirit's activity in his life. He rejoiced in the forgiveness of sins found only in the Word of Christ.

So it is with us in the Holy Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. Christ's atoning sacrifice for our sins, even our sins which warp worship, was a once-and-for-all event, and the only sacrifices possible now are sacrifices of thanksgiving. In the courts of the Lord we give thanks to God for His marvellous gift, but it is the gift of Himself that motivates our thanksgiving.

The thanksgiving in our worship is constantly being fed by the great deeds of Jesus Christ, who is the Source of all blessings and the root of all thanksgiving. Praise in our worship is the church's response to each of the great redemptive events presented successively in her worship: our Lord's Birth, His healing ministry, the Cross, the Resurrection, the Ascension. Christ is the cause and content of the thankfulness of the church.

How is it in your life: Is a day in the courts of the Lord better than a thousand days elsewhere? If you have made going to the courts of the Lord an end in itself, then very likely your worship is filled with frustration, fear and pride.

But if you have found the courts of the Lord to be the workshop of the Holy Spirit whereby He fills your life with what you need the most, and bestows it as a gift, namely, the forgiveness of sins, then you are a person who longs and faints for survival, not in defiance of God, but in His presence.

Yours is certainly a worship in Word and Sacrament that knows the meaning of God's grace revealed in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ and responds in heartfelt thanksgiving. I urge you always to worship God in His courts by believing in what He has done for you in Christ and thanking Him for that grace, which things are the least and the most you can do. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Gal 5:16-24

<sup>2</sup> cf. Eph. 6:13-17

<sup>3</sup> Luke 17:11-19