

The Preparation For Worship.

Text: John 4:24

Suggested Hymns:

507, 330, 501, 311, 459

1) The Invocation

2) The Confession of Sins

3) The Absolution

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 John 4:24, ²⁴ ***“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”*** (NKJV)

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

Dear friends in Christ,

The Lord clearly tells us here in our text that true worship of God must be of a spiritual nature. We must worship God in spirit and in truth. This surely implies that without some sort of spiritual understanding or true faith it is not possible to worship God correctly.

Those people who do not have such faith therefore, cannot understand what worship is, or what happens in our Worship Service. To understand this, we must be guided by God’s Word and revelation and must learn to accept and appreciate it in true faith.

The Scripture informs us that really the whole of creation is engaged in the worship of God, from the myriads of angels and saints of all ages, down to every creature which is in heaven and on earth, and under the earth and such as are in the sea, as we read in Revelation 5:13, ¹³ ***“And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: “Blessing and honor and glory and power Be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!”***

Our worship then is not some private little function that we arrange here between ourselves, but it is rather a matter of tuning in to this great cosmic act of worship and joining with the angels and archangels and all the creatures of God to give honour and glory to God.

Therefore we do not come here simply to listen to a sermon and sing a few hymns, but rather to take part in an act of truly cosmic proportions. But now, since we are in the physical realm, we cannot just join this spiritual worship without some physical activity on the basis of which our faith can participate in this worship.

This is our order of worship or liturgy which the church has set up over the years. Without going in to the history of how this developed from the very early church we shall consider this formal liturgy as it is printed in our Hymnbooks.

On page 1 you will find printed in big letters at the top of the page the words “THE SERVICE WITH COMMUNION.” This is intended to be the regular service of the church, for in the early church the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was always celebrated when they met for worship.

The Worship Service is arranged just like the church building. It includes three distinct parts which correspond to the porch, the nave and the chancel.

The first part, which corresponds to the porch, is known as the preparation and includes the confession of sins and absolution. The second part, which corresponds to the nave (where the congregation sits) is the liturgy of the Word, which includes the Scripture lessons and the sermon, as well as the congregation’s response to these. And then comes the third part, the liturgy of the Sacrament which corresponds to the chancel before the altar. This includes, of course, the consecration of the elements and the distribution of the Lord’s Supper.

Today we shall consider only the first of these three sections, which is called the preparation. It contains the Invocation, the Confession of Sins, and the Absolution. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Preparation For Worship - The Invocation

The preparation begins with what is known as the **Invocation**. Here the pastor sings or says, “*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*”, and the congregation responds by singing or saying ‘*Amen*’ What is the reason for that? Why does the pastor say “*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit?*”

We need to remember what is happening here. The congregation has assembled to join with all the angels and archangels of heaven as well as all the creatures in heaven and earth and the seas, and the saints of God throughout history to worship the Lord – to give ***“Blessing and honor and glory and power Be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!”***

In fact we enter into the special presence of the eternal Lord and Creator who has assured us in Matthew 18:20 that ***“where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”*** This means that God Himself is present here with us in a special way. How can we wretched sinners dare to be present and join in such an awesome act of worship before our holy God?

In ourselves we deserve to be cast out of God’s presence forever because of our sins. There is only one reason why we can dare to stand here and join in this majestic worship with any confidence and that is because we come in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Yes we have actually been baptised into the name of this God so that we belong to Him. He Himself claims us now as His own. He has in fact made us His children. And so we can come and stand here in God’s presence to worship Him with all the holy angels of God only because we bear His name.

The triune God is Himself directly committed to, and involved in, our welfare. God the Father has created us and sacrificed His Son to redeem us. God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, has done everything for our salvation – fulfilling the law for us and suffering the punishment that we deserved for our sins. God the Holy Spirit has overcome our rebellious nature and kindled faith in our hearts so that we have been regenerated, or born again into the Church of God and have now become the children of God, who bear His name.

And so, on behalf of the congregation the pastor makes this confession of faith, or declaration, at the beginning of the Worship Service. He, as it were, presents the tickets, or the passports of the congregation – their credentials that enable them to enter the worship and join with the very angels of God to give ***“Blessing and honor and glory and power Be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!”***

To this the congregation is to respond with a hearty and enthusiastic ***“Amen.”*** The word ***“Amen,”*** of course, means ***“We agree”*** or ***“That is right,”*** or ***“So be***

it.” In other words, by this response the congregation identifies itself with what the pastor has said.

The next thing is a hymn of invocation, or some other hymn that fits with the particular theme of the day. A Hymn, of course, is like a prayer, and since it is the Holy Spirit who prepares our hearts for true worship it is fitting that we sing a hymn of invocation at this stage, pleading for God’s guidance and blessing.

2. The Confession Of Sins

Next comes the **Confession of Sins**. Just as we scrape our boots on the mat at the door and leave our hats and umbrellas and other burdens in the porch as we enter the church, so we also need to unburden ourselves as we enter into the worship proper.

The natural reaction of a man who stands in the presence of the holy and righteous God is to be conscious of his sins. When Isaiah had a vision of the Lord we read that he said, *“Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”*¹ And when Peter was conscious of the fact that Jesus was his Lord and his God, we read that he said, *“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”*²

And so we too, when we enter the special presence of God here in our worship, ought to feel conscious of our sins. The more we are aware of God’s holy presence the more we will feel our utter unworthiness to stand before Him.

It is true, of course, that all our sins have already been taken away by Christ. They have been forgiven once and for all when Jesus paid the price for them on the cross, but because we are weak, human flesh and blood who still sin daily, we can not help feeling our sinfulness in His presence, and we need often to be assured of His pardon.

And so the Christian who feels his sinfulness in the presence of God does not cover it over and put on a brazen face as if it did not matter, but he goes with his burden in all humility, to the Lord who so graciously invites him, *“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*³

Therefore the minister says to the congregation, *“Beloved in the Lord. Let us draw near with a true heart, and confess our sins to God our Father, beseeching Him in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to grant us forgiveness.”*

Such a confession simply belongs to the nature of a “*true heart*” – one that is honest and straight forward in all humility.

Our natural pride, of course, would have us conceal our faults and hypocritically pretend that we are innocent, or even to justify and excuse our faults. But this is not the way of a true heart.

Even in human relationships, when we have wronged our neighbour, and then refuse to confess our faults, and pretend that all is well, there is at once a certain uneasiness or shiftiness about us, that will spoil our relationship with that person.

Only when we frankly and honestly confess our faults with a true heart and receive his forgiveness can a proper, cordial relationship be maintained. How much more don't we need to confess our sins to our heavenly Father who hates all sin and evil, and against whom we sin daily. He is aware of everything we do. Nothing at all can escape His notice as He sees into the deep recesses of our hearts.

If we are to have a good relationship with God, then, we cannot pretend that all is well with us but we need to draw near to Him, with a true heart and frankly confess our sins, seeking His mercy and forgiveness.

The pastor and the congregation then kneels or bows their heads, as a sign of humility and sorrow for sin, and the confession begins with two verses from Scripture which are chanted antiphonally by the pastor and the congregation.

The first verse is Psalm 124:8 and sets the mood of the confession; “***Our help is in the name of the Lord: who made heaven and earth,***” and the next verse is taken from Psalm 32:5 where David acknowledges that when he refused to confess his sins he had no peace of conscience or peace before God.

But later, when he did confess his sins, and received the pardon and forgiveness of God, he could live in peace with Him again. This is the aim of our confession too. And so the minister says with David, “***I said I will confess my transgressions to the Lord***” and the congregation responds, “***Then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.***”

This too is the confident trust of the congregation before God who assures us in 1 John 1:9, *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

The words of the confession which follow are the general confession spoken by the pastor and people together on their knees before God.

“O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor miserable sinner, confess to Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have offended Thee and justly deserved Thy punishment in time and in eternity.

But I am heartily sorry for them and earnestly repent of them, and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy, and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me.”

Notice that there is no confession of any particular sins that someone might have committed, but the confession is very general and applies to all sinners, and therefore includes all particular sins as well. The point of the confession is that it is a frank acknowledgment before God of all our sins, and a realisation of the seriousness of such sin – that it deserves punishment for time and eternity.

It includes also genuine sorrow for sin and an earnest putting away of sin in order to lead a God-pleasing life as well as a plea for the mercy and grace of God on account of the atoning sacrifice and death of Christ.

In addition, this general confession made by all together, becomes also an individual confession in which the pastor asks each person in the presence of God who searches the heart to confess his own personal guilt before God. When we stand before the all-seeing eye of God there is no possibility of hiding in the crowd, as it were. He sees our hearts plainly so that we must face up to God personally and individually. And so the chief points of the confession are taken up and addressed to each member of the congregation in the three questions asked by the pastor.

“Do you confess that you have sinned, and do you repent of your sins?

Do you believe that Jesus Christ has redeemed you from all your sins, and do you desire forgiveness in His name?

Do you earnestly purpose with the help of the Holy Spirit to live as in God's presence, and to strive daily after holiness of heart and life?"

3. The Absolution

This confession is followed immediately by the absolution or forgiveness spoken by the pastor *"in the stead and by the command"* of the Lord Jesus Christ. The pastor does not forgive the sins of people in his own right according to his own whims, but he announces the grace of God to the congregation.

It is only because God has already – through Christ Jesus – forgiven all our sins and the sins of the whole world that the pastor can pronounce that forgiveness to sinners. He does not decide who is to be forgiven and who is not, but he simply announces the forgiveness of God which Christ has won for the whole world.

The pastor has been commissioned by Christ in his call to do this publicly, and so he says, *"Upon this your confession, and by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word, I announce the grace of God to all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."*

But while this forgiveness of God is available to all, since Christ indeed died for all, yet it can be accepted only by faith. And so those who are not true Christians and do not have true faith but live in impenitence and unbelief cannot possibly receive the forgiveness which Christ has won for them so that it is of no use to them at all.

Such people cannot take any comfort from the absolution, and so the pastor says, *"God forbid that through impenitence and unbelief any among you should reject his grace and forgiveness, and your sins be retained."*

But the final statement is one of assurance to all penitent sinners, *"May he comfort your hearts By His holy absolution, and strengthen you by His Sacrament, that your joy may be full."*

And so every sinner who has come to true repentance and faith may know assuredly that his sins, no matter how great or how numerous, are indeed forgiven – removed as far as the east is from the west. The pastor here pronounces this absolution in the stead and by the command of Christ himself –

as His mouthpiece or spokesman – so that it is as valid and certain in heaven also as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

And so the result is that all true children of God can stand before God with peace and confidence. Hence the following blessing, *“Peace be with you.”* To this the congregation responds again with a deliberate and meaningful *“Amen,”* So be it. That is just what they need as they enter into the special presence of God.

All of this is simply the preparation for the worship proper which begins with the INTROIT, but it is very important because if we are to appear before the holy and righteous God to worship Him together with all the angels and archangels, the saints of all ages and all the creatures in heaven and earth, then we can do so confidently only if we are truly at peace with God, assured of complete forgiveness and leaving all our sins behind us as Jesus says in Matthew 5:23-24,²³ *“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,”*²⁴ *“leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”*

We can come before God in true worship only if our heart is right with Him, if we penitently confess our sins and receive His forgiveness in true faith.

And so we have seen that just as we enter the church through the door and through the porch where we leave all our burdens, before we take our place in the pews, so we enter the worship service through the invocation (in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit) via the confession of sins and absolution, where we leave behind all our sins, as it were, to enter into the presence of God who comes to us then in His Word and Sacrament.

May God help us all better to understand the meaning of this liturgy so that we appreciate it and are able to live it out Sunday by Sunday as we join with all the creatures of God to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Amen.

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

¹ Isaiah 6:5

² Luke 5:8

³ Matthew 11:28