

Worshiping Together

Our small groups at Mosaic are all about building a community of healthy, committed disciples, that the world might come to know through us that Jesus Christ is Lord. This was our conversation last week in our small group ... we got to talking about whether our little group ought to claim that kind of language. After all, can one group change the world? Which led someone to talk about a single mom in need of compassion and understanding, and how a group could really make the difference for her ... and that led us into a discussion of how we might reach out as a group to more single parents, and someone said, “You know, maybe we’re not changing the world, but we’d be changing *their* world.”

That’s what its all about. When a group of people who follow Jesus gets together to pray and watch for God and hear each other’s stories before you know it, someone’s world gets changed. That’s been the model from the beginning. We find it described as early as the book of Acts, chapter two. Watch where they began when the first believers set out to change the world.

*Acts 2:42-47 – They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. **Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.** All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

In your worship insert, underline the phrase “Everyone was filled with awe,” and circle the phrase “praising God.” Notice that they continued to meet together in the temple courts, but they also broke bread together in their homes and praised God there. This is a radical departure for the first century for Jewish believers who associated the temple with everything holy. The temple was the center of the spiritual life, because the temple is where they went to sacrifice in order to be cleansed from their sins. But almost immediately after the resurrection, these early Christ-followers got it that because of the sacrifice of Jesus ... one offering for all time ... their salvation was no longer tied to the temple. Jesus was their sacrifice so Jesus was their salvation. Peter

explained it in his letter. He said (1 Peter 2:4-5) - "*Come to Him, the Living Stone (not a building but a man) - rejected by human beings but chosen by God and precious to him ... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house (we are now the temple because Jesus lives in us) to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ.*"

Not an animal sacrifice but a spiritual sacrifice. So when it says this new community was filled with awe, and that they were amazed by the wonders and signs and that they praised God ... well, that was their spiritual sacrifice. And it happened right there in their homes as they met together. So let's talk about some practical ways to bring worship into our groups and into our everyday lives. We discover that as we allow worship to take the lead in our spiritual lives, it feeds into every other part of us. If you'd like to take out your worship insert, there are three places where you can fill in the blanks, and the first one (pick any blank) teaches us that **worship is praise**. Acts 2:43 says - *Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles*. Once these guys started looking for God, they found out he was everywhere.

In our small group, we begin each week by asking, "Where have you seen God at work this week?" And every week, we hear a great story of how God has blessed someone just at the point of their deep need. And it is amazing to me that when folks begin a conversation in this way ... no matter how down any of us was when we started ... everyone is encouraged by the time we've heard the stories. Filled with awe at the wonders and signs being done all around us. Someone told me recently, "I have always thought God shows himself in little ways and we sort of hope that's him, but in the last few days," this person testified, "since making a decision for Christ, I've seen God move in powerful ways. He's been showing up everywhere!" How can you *not* be encouraged when you hear that?

Psalm 22 says God inhabits the praises of his people. Which means that if we begin to thank God for all he's done and praise Him for who He is, God will show up. There's an impressive example of this in the Bible. Paul and Silas were early missionaries to the Greek world, and on their first journey out, they were in Philippi when Paul made the mistake of delivering a demon from a woman. You'd think that would be a good thing ... but this woman was a slave and her demon gave her the power to predict the future (like a fortune teller or a palm reader) ... and her owners were making a killing off of her. So when Paul cast out her demon, they were

not happy. In fact, they got so mad they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace, where they beat them and threw them into prison. The guard was expressly commanded to make sure they didn't escape so he put them in an inner cell and fastened their feet to the stocks. With that kind of day, anyone would feel pretty discouraged. But listen to how Paul and Silas responded.

Acts 16:25-26 says -- About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose.

God inhabits the praises of his people! When they began to sing about God, everyone's chains came loose! When we stop and give thanks for what he has done ... when we stop and notice of where he has helped us along the way ... when we stop and acknowledge the times he was there with us ... when we praise him, he comes and invests his power in that kind of gathering ... and the result is that chains come loose.

Hillsong has a great chorus ... *"The same power that conquered the grave lives in me, lives in me. Your love that rescued the earth lives in me, lives in me."* Maybe you need to hear that this morning, if you came in here with a load of worry and hurt. The best response is praise. There is an index card in the pocket of your chair. Maybe you'd like to reach for that and write down one thing God has done for you ... a place where you've seen him at work this week? God inhabits the praises of his people.

Now, watch how God has designed this. Praise offered to Him comes back as a gift to us! It not only brings the power of God to bear in our lives. It also builds our trust in Him ... so that as we watch him work, we become more aware of his goodness, more filled with awe, more willing to give more of ourselves to him. So praise **leads to surrender.**

In a small group, this may mean admitting a weakness or confessing a sin to your brothers and sisters in Christ, so they can pray for you. It may mean a sacrifice of time just to get there some weeks. It may mean a willingness to let that group study bring you into a new place of surrender. I've seen people surrender to Christ in a small group.

We don't hear that word surrender much in the marketplace. We hear about winning, succeeding, overcoming, and conquering ... but not obedience or surrender. But as Rick Warren says "surrendering to God is the heart of worship. It is the natural response to God's amazing love and mercy ... True worship – bringing God pleasure – happens when you give yourself completely to God."

Jesus never one implied that we could follow him without giving anything up ... as if we can follow Jesus while we cling to our rights, hang on to our sins, and run our own lives. That's not in there. Not even once. What Jesus did say was this (Matt.7:21) - *Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.* You see, we can not claim forgiveness at Jesus' expense, but blow off the rest of it. A decision to follow Jesus is a decision to give our wills over to God ... to do what God wants me to do rather than what I want to do.

In war terms, surrender is a decision to stop fighting. And that's what God is after. He'd like us to stop fighting, because he sees that we are only struggling with ourselves. We are our own worst enemies! So our surrender is a death to self ... but it is also a decision to finally live. Jesus said (Matthew 10:39) – *Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.*

Sheldon gave us a great 'surrender' prayer during his testimony. "God, I am lost." That's probably just about a perfect prayer of surrender. If you're looking for one, that would be a good choice.

C.S. Lewis says, "The more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become – because he made us ... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own." That's all Jesus asks of anybody ... to become completely His, so we can become complete.

So as we praise him ... just acknowledging where he's at work ... we find new levels of trust. As we trust him, we're more willing to surrender. And as we surrender, God uses us to bring the Kingdom down. So praise

leads to surrender which **leads to giving**. In a small group, this means ... giving! Giving to those in need, both within and beyond our groups. And we do it, not just to fill the need but as a spiritual act of worship.

In Mark chapter 12, Jesus has a conversation with a guy ... a religious teacher. The guy asks him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Which was a tricky question, because for Jews, all 600-plus commandments were important. That would be like asking, "Which is more important ... that we don't lie, or that we don't steal?" Obviously, both are important.

Jesus saw the curveball, so he took the guy back to when Moses first presented the ten commandments to the people. Just after he gave them the law, he gave a kind of call-to-commitment speech that would become the heart of the Jewish faith ... a little paragraph of words called the *Shema*. These are still the most important words in the Jewish faith, and we find them in our Bible in the book of Deuteronomy. This is what Jesus quotes to that teacher. Will you read together? (Mark 12:29-31) - *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.* That's the end of the *Shema*, but Jesus didn't stop there. He plugged in another commandment. He said, *The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment (singular) than these.* So Jesus taught that it is not until you put these two thoughts together ... loving God and loving others ... that you get the big picture of what matters to God. Praise and surrender, yes ... but also giving.

The teacher who asked Jesus the question agrees with him. But listen to *how* he agrees. He says, "You're right. Loving God and loving others ... this is more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices." In his world, that was a radical thing to say, because ... remember? ... burnt offerings and sacrifices were how Jews related to God. That was their worship. So when he makes this connection between Jesus' reply and the Jewish sacrificial system, he is saying, in effect, that **love is more important to worship than ritual**. That's profound! Love is the foundation of worship. We give ourselves out *in love* to God ... *to* those God loves. And here's the real kicker ... Giving creates blessing. When we give, God is going to give back to us. That's not the *reason* we give, but that's the way God has ordered it. And what does blessing do? Blessing creates praise. We praise him for what he has done, surrender a little more of ourselves into his will, then give out of our obedience ... only to be blessed again. That's how worship changes us.

When you come for communion this morning, come with an attitude of praise. If you are ready to find your place in a small group, then why not practice a little surrender of your schedule and make that commitment today? That is also an act of worship. Share with someone where you've seen God at work this week. And pray for the Lord of the harvest to show you where best to offer yourself to the world as an act of worship.