

Place: *Harvest Presbyterian Church*
Date: *January 20, 2013*
Series: *Worship*
Text: *Micah 6:6-8; Mark 12:28-34*
Preacher: *Pastor Jim Stochl*

6 “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” 8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” 29 Jesus answered, “The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” 32 Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other’; 33 and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question. (Mark 12:28-34)

The Soul of Worship

In our series on worship, we initially saw that worship is a response to God’s acts in creation and redemption. Last week we saw that God desires us to worship with all our hearts, and not half-heartedly. Today, we continue to explore Jesus’ answer about loving God with all our soul.

In the Bible, the word “soul” is used similarly to “heart”. Where the heart is the center of emotions, the soul is the center of the will. Worship is a choice, then. To what or to whom do we give ultimate worth?

My friend Rick is a good, moral man. He and I worked together coaching and refereeing youth soccer, and basketball. He was one of the best coaches in the region, and his teams consistently won. Rick works hard, he is ethical, and he loves his family. Rick's wife and kids are Christians, but Rick does not consider himself a Christian. His family always bugged him to go to church with them. So one Sunday, he went with them to the Sunday evening service, which was more informal, and more contemporary. He liked it, and he kept going.

One day, he asked if he could talk to me. We met, and he told me his conundrum. He said that he kind of liked going to the church service. He enjoyed the singing, the people were friendly and welcoming, and he liked the pastor and understood most of what the pastor said. And yet, Rick felt like he was missing something, that something was not right.

As he talked, and I tried to listen closely, it dawned on me what was going on with Rick. So I said something like this, "Rick, you have spent your entire life doing what Rick wanted to do. Not in a selfish or abusive way, but that's your track record. However, in the worship service, no matter how intellectual or emotional or relational the people are, they are doing something you have not and cannot do. They are striving to say 'no' to themselves, and say 'yes' to God. They are striving to do what God wants, and not what they want."

Suddenly, Rick looked at me and said, "That sounds really close. But I am not sure I am ready to do what God wants me to do. I like being my own boss and doing what I want to do."

Worship, loving God, according to Jesus, not only affects our emotions, it affects our will, our desires. And in a consumer culture, this is a huge problem for us. But it has been the quintessential human problem almost from the beginning.

Let me illustrate it this way:

- Picture of two toilet paper rolls (over and under)
- Picture of two toothpaste tubes toilet (squeezed and rolled)
- Picture of Giants hat and Dodgers hat
- Ah-minds or all-monds
- Cap with curved brim or straight brim

- Presents on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning
- Picture of choir and praise team

We all of us have preferences, deeply ingrained notions of right and wrong, correct and incorrect. If I asked you which of the pairs in the preceding slides were right, most of your answers would be completely based on something other than logic. They are deep seated. From our families. From our histories? Ultimately, from our choices.

When Jesus says we are to love God with all our soul, one of the things he means is that we are to worship God with our wills, with the choices we make.

Garden of Eden

There are two dramatic scenes in the Bible that summarizes this, and both happen in a garden.

The first scene is Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. God had created a good world that was perfect. And God put Adam and Eve in this garden to tend it and care for it. Everything Adam could plant actually grew and produced fruit. God had also told Adam that they could have anything to eat, anything!, except the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. Like telling a child that they can have anything in the Safeway except for the chocolate chip cookies. Sure enough, let the kids roam free in Safeway and where will they wind up? Gazing longingly at the chocolate chip cookies! It may actually be one way to get children to eat what is good for them. Forbid them from eating broccoli and Brussels Sprouts and eggplant.

So Adam and Eve wind up being drawn towards the tree in the middle of the garden. "Why would God give us everything except this one thing? Is God holding out on us? What is so special about this fruit? It is beautiful, isn't it? And it looks like it would taste good. But God said, 'you cannot eat of it.' Well, what does God know? I want it. I am going to have it."

So what was the deal? The whole garden was good, the whole earth was good. I am assuming that the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden was actually good, and probably pretty tasty! But the issue was that God had said, "no". And this was a test for Adam and Eve. Do they say "no" to their desires and "yes" to God, or do they say "yes" to their desires and "no" to God?

We know how that story ended. They said “yes” to themselves, and the consequences were catastrophic. They were suddenly estranged from God, from one another, from the earth, they felt guilt, they tried to hide, they were evicted from the garden, etc. That’s our story, too.

There is a scene in the recent movie, “Flight”, that is absolutely chilling. Whip Whitaker is the pilot played by Denzel Washington. When the plane is damaged, he makes a miraculous landing, saving the whole plane full of passengers except for a couple of the crew.

Initially a hero, he is then charged with having a blood alcohol level above the legal limit. In fact, he had been drinking and snorting cocaine before taking off in the plane. So the story highlights how he handles his own addictions.

In the scene at the end, the night before Captain Whitaker is to testify before the NTSB, he is locked in a hotel room. A man guards the door, preventing Captain Whitaker from going out, and to prevent anyone from coming in.

Captain Whitaker had been sober for weeks, and sworn off drinking and drugs. But on this night, with his whole life and career on the line the next day, he nervously paces the room. He then discovers the door to the adjoining room is open. He goes through it, and immediately looks at the minibar. He takes out a little bottle of whisky. And in this scene, he stares at it. For 30 seconds. For a minute. For 90 seconds. Just Captain Whitaker and this bottle.

There were people in the theater yelling at him to leave, to go back to his room! The tension was unbelievable. I don’t want to ruin the movie for you, but the fact is that Captain Whitaker was unable to make a good choice, because he had been defined by all his previous choices. Controlled by them. Enslaved by them.

Saying “yes” to yourself and “no” to God is not a one-time event. Those choices are made day after day after day, in choices large and small.

Garden of Gethsemane

The second scene is of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus had been up all night, praying about this awful event that was to occur. Looming before Jesus was the Roman cross. Rejection. Pain. Death. He

was leaving his followers whom he had grown to love. Were they ready for this? Was he ready for this? This was the reason why he was born. Every step in his life and ministry pointed to the cross.

So now, on the eve of fulfilling his destiny, he prayed. He asked God to change His mind. He asked God to do this in some other way. He asked God. He begged God. He pleaded with God. He bargained with God. He cried with tears to God. And yet, when all was said and done, Jesus affirmed that he was committed to God's will rather than his own. "Not my will be done, but thy will be done."

This is the exact opposite of what Adam and Eve said in the Garden of Eden. Adam's actions said "not thy will be done, but my will be done".

It is always amazing to me that Jesus did this. For us. And he did it whole-heartedly. He could have just resigned himself to saying "yes" to God. "Well, OK, God, if this is really what you want, I guess I will go along with it, I suppose." There is nothing wishy washy in Jesus, nothing about giving up, about settling. He affirms, "Not my will be done, but thy will be done." And he got up, and faced the crowd, and the court, and the soldiers, and the cross. There was no turning back.

One man's saying "yes" to himself and "no" to God brought ruin to the human race. But one man's saying "no" to himself and "yes" to God brought eternal blessings to the human race.

We Worship What We Say "Yes" To

We worship what we say "yes" to. And when we worship God truly, we learn to say "yes" to Him and "no" to other things. Let me tell you two areas I am wrestling with right now.

One of my favorite Bible books is Philippians. Reading through it recently, I read this verse. "Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." (Philippians 3:19)

I have read Philippians dozens if not hundreds of times in the past, and even preached through it more than once. I never noticed this verse, and it stopped me cold. "Their god is the belly." I have an eating problem. I do not eat terribly, but I do not eat healthily, either. Mostly, I eat what I, ready for this?, what I WANT to eat. Not what is best for me. What I WANT

to eat. So as I worship God in private and with you, God keeps bringing this verse to mind, and I am wrestling with how to say “yes” to God and “no” to myself. The issue is not what I eat as much as my being held hostage to my desires.

Second, my whole life, it seems, I have been over-committed. My plate is way too small for all I want to put on it. I recently was invited by the Stockton presbytery to attend a Stewardship Conference in St. Louis in March. I have some experience with stewardship, and also some interest. So it was attractive to me to consider going. And then, as I prayed and thought, I recognized that my schedule is already getting a bit crowded. Saying “yes” to this conference would have taken me away from here, and from Beth, for three days. For what? One of my great weaknesses is saying “yes” to needs when I should be saying “no”. And so yesterday I told the presbytery “no”, to find someone else to go. You have no idea how hard that was for me to say, “no”. But ultimately, I felt it was a way for me to say “yes” to God and “no” to myself.

Conclusion

Worship involves our wills, our choices, our saying “yes” to God and “no” to ourselves.

Some of us are so used to saying “yes” to ourselves that we are entirely unaware of how we are saying “no” to God. Jesus Christ came to set us free from ourselves, that we might live for God and others.

To what are you saying “yes” to yourself and “no” to God? Just like with Adam and Eve, getting my own way is a disaster waiting to happen. But just like Jesus saying “yes” to God can have a profoundly positive influence on others, and yourself.

To what are you saying “yes” to yourself and “no” to God?