

"TRUE WORSHIP"
October 20, 1991

TEXT: Luke 18:14 ". . . For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

As I noted a little earlier, we will be having an informational forum this afternoon for those who would like to know more about this church, whether they be members, prospective members, or just curious bystanders. We have them twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall. And one of the things I always stress on such occasions is the fact that we are not a creedal church. Believing as we do in the sanctity of private conscience, we Congregationalists do not demand that everyone believe exactly the same thing.

But the question then arises, what holds us together as a church? If we do not all believe the same thing, what is the glue? And the answer is, "Our covenant." From the earliest days, we Congregationalists have formed covenants with God and with each other to be the Church to the best of our ability. The words may differ from church to church, but the meaning is the same. What holds us together is our resolve to work with each other for the glory and in the service of God.

Our own church covenant is one of the things our Long Range Planning Committee is presently taking a look at, but here is what it says at present. "The purpose of this church shall be to bind together followers of Jesus Christ for the object of sharing in the worship of God and in making His will dominant in the lives of men, especially as that will is set forth in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ." The worship of God and obedience to God's will are what hold us together. Whatever else we do, those are the essentials.

But what do we mean by worship? If it is essential to who we are, we ought to know what worship is. One of the best definitions I know was laid down by William Temple, who said, "To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God."

But that is pretty long, perhaps too long for most of us to remember. A shorter definition was that given by Daniel Webster some hundred and fifty years ago. One night, at a banquet in his honor, he was asked to share the greatest thought that ever

entered his mind? And without hesitation, he replied, "My responsibility to God."

But what I would like to focus upon is the concept of worship presented by Jesus in the parable he told in this morning's scripture. There we have one of the really great word pictures in all of literature. In our imagination who of us can not see the two men Jesus was describing? On the one hand, there is the Pharisee, a good man, respected by his neighbors, a pillar of his church, and a leader of his community. He is standing there in his best clothes, his hands clean, his face scrubbed, his hair combed, looking for all the world like the Junior Chamber of Commerce "Man of the Year."

And, over here, is the Publican. No one stands near him, for he is an outcast, hated and rejected by all who know him. He, too, may be well dressed, for, in those days, tax collecting was a profitable business. But, just looking at him, you can tell that something is wrong. There is a nervous look about him. Something about the way he keeps looking down at his feet, unwilling even to lift up his eyes toward heaven. He has a beaten, hangdog look about him. A loser if there ever was one.

Yet Jesus criticized the Pharisee and praised the Publican. He said, "I tell you this man [that is, the Publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other." Now, you and I have heard that story so often that, for us, it may have lost something of the power it had for those in Jesus' day.

For them, the word, Pharisee, meant something good and noble. They were the most religious of all men, the most scrupulous observers of the law. As he, himself, said, he fasted twice each week, when Jewish law required only one fast a year, on the Day of Atonement. He gave a tenth of everything he got. Jewish law required a tithe only on the produce of the field, but this man tithed on everything. To those who heard this story, that Pharisee was a paragon of virtue. So why did Jesus condemn him?

And how could he praise the Publican --someone who collaborated with the hated Romans, a cheat, so despised by other Jews that they treat him like a Gentile. But, you see, that is just the point. The Publican was a sinner, and the Pharisee something of a saint. Judged by outward standards, there was no comparison. The Pharisee had the best of it in every respect --except one: their attitude about themselves.

The Pharisee was a good man, but he allowed his goodness --and his superiority over others-- to go to his head. Since he apparently felt no need for mercy, he seems to have lost his need for God altogether. For him, religion was important because of what it did for him, not for what it enabled him to do for God.

Listen to Jesus' scathing description, "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself." It was almost as if God did not

even exist. His prayers were little more than ill-disguised self-congratulation. No recognition of his creaturehood, no admitting of his need for God, no submission to God's will. He had become his own deity. He obeyed the Law because it made him feel superior, not because he loved God.

Is it any wonder, then, that Jesus condemned him? He saw through the religious veneer to the pride and self-sufficiency beneath. And, for Jesus, one's relationship to God was what really mattered. That is why he praised the Publican, who, outwardly, was just as bad as the Pharisee was good. For in that moment of worship, true worship for the Publican, something happened. Something that caused him to see himself as he really was.

And he was ashamed. Too ashamed even to lift his eyes to heaven. Too ashamed to do anything but cry out in pain, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" And presumably, like Zacchaeus, his life was changed. Presumably he began to live a decent, upright life, as indeed he should. For no one, least of all Jesus, would say it does not matter how we live. But Jesus knew that a good life is not a virtue when it makes us lose our touch with God.

It seems to me that this is an important lesson. For, in some respects, most of us here today have more in common with the Pharisee than we do with the Publican. By and large, we, too, are good people, respected by our peers. We are leaders in our church and in our community. Few of us were driven here this morning in desperate need of God. Like that Pharisee, most of us probably came because we wanted to, because it makes us feel good.

And there is nothing wrong with that. I am glad that it makes you feel good. It makes me feel good, too. But there is an element of danger just the same. The possibility that we may be more concerned with our feelings than we are with God. The possibility that the sense of need, the sense of submission, the sense of creaturehood may somehow be missing. There is the danger that our worship, like that of the Pharisee, may become a worship of self rather than of God.

There is a warning in the invitation to the Lord's table that is worth remembering even when we are not celebrating communion. It says, "Let us sit together in humility and thanksgiving, rather than in pride or possessiveness. Let us confess that we are not righteous, but that we love our Lord, Jesus Christ, and desire to remember him. Let us come, not that we are strong, but that we are needy. Not that we have any claim on Christ, but that he invites us to receive his grace and to experience his presence."

Those are good words to remember whenever we worship. The word, worship, comes from an Old English root which meant "worth-ship," ascribing value to some thing or some One. In our worship, let it always be God who is that supreme value, the One

to Whom we attune our lives. Let it be a time when we humble ourselves before Him. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."