

## Don't Give It Up!

A sermon based on Hebrews 10:19-25

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've never been to one of the meetings before. You probably haven't, either. I'm talking about AA – Alcoholics Anonymous – or another addictions support group. But you know their purpose. They understand how dangerous their addiction is to their health. And so there, you are with people who are going through what you are, who want to stop their addiction, who want to encourage you and be encouraged by you in their journey.

It's a hard journey, though, isn't it? One of the pastors at conference this past week told me he was done with smoking. The next day, though, he told me he had had a cigarette with another pastor but was very adamant in saying, "That was my last one! I'm giving it up!" It's a hard journey.

Well friends, today, and actually, spanning the rest of the summer, we're going to focus on something that affects your heart and your spiritual health...this time for your good! We're going to walk through different parts of worship, understand better why we do what we do in worship, and along the way, be enriched and encouraged in our faith in Jesus.

But today, God's asking you to do something a little different from these addiction support groups. He wants you to make worship your addiction (in a good way). He wants you to make it your habit. And he provides you a support group...the rest of us! He wants you to not give it up!

Don't give worship up. Seems simple enough of a request. I would say the fact you're here this morning shows you haven't given it up. At a time where percentages are showing people are leaving churches behind in large numbers, you're still here. You haven't given it up. Again, it's simple enough of a request. But my next request may not be. And that's: "make worship your habit."

Do you understand what I mean by that? Well, do you have any habits? I do, like these. My nervous habit is I bite my nails. I often don't consciously think about it. When I'm stressed, it's my coping mechanism. It's something I routinely, regularly turn to. It's a habit. I bite my nails. It's not a good habit. Not every habit is.

But worship is. And I want you to make it your habit. I don't want you to give this up. But why? Why make worship a habit? Why not give it up? Why even worship at all?

Well, before we can get to that, let's take a step back and talk about what we mean when we say worship. At its core, worship is the way we give honor and praise and thanks to God after reading and learning and experiencing what he has done for us. In other words, worship really entails our entire life, doesn't it? So the way you think, the way you speak, the way you act, how you treat and interact with other people, how you treat and interact with your God...inside these walls, outside these walls...again, our entire lives...all of that is an opportunity to worship.

But that's not the focus here. These verses here are talking about specific worship. They're talking about "meeting together." They're talking about here...church. Don't give it up. Make church (we also call it corporate worship) your habit.

And that, friends, is not an easy request. It's not an easy request because of who's out there, trying to get in here, and just as much, who's trying to get you and me out of here. Of course, that's Satan. You see, this place is much like an embassy in a hostile, foreign nation. This place is safe. This place is sovereign. This is God's house. We are his people. We are heaven's citizens. And Satan and his forces of evil do not like that...at all. He wants us. He wants us out of here because out there, he's got the upper hand. Out there, his temptations are much more effective.

And so, his attacks on you and me and us are varied. He uses an ever-changing culture which is taking a more critical and subjective approach to interpreting and questioning Scripture to create intense pressure on churches, like ours, to change our teaching or face certain and heavy criticism. He's placing churches out there where worldly "love" is prevailing and sinful lifestyles and just sin in general is being tolerated and accepted...and those places that are exploding with success. He's using places like those to draw us out and turn us away from the truth of God's Word.

I would say, friends, those attacks and other similar ones are certainly easier to fend off. Easier than the subtle attacks he uses on you, personally, to break your habit of worship or prevent you from even developing that habit.

Attacks like "why do you need to go to church when you can just worship God, honor him and give him praise at home (so you can sleep in) or in nature (as you enjoy the beauty of his creation)." Or, "why do you need to gather with all these other believers when God's Word says 'wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I with them,' which friends, truthfully, is a gross misapplication of Jesus' words in Matthew 18.

Attacks which make you even question the importance of worship, instilling attitudes, like, "why even go to worship? I know everything already. I hear the same basic message. I'm not being encouraged in my faith in Jesus." Or maybe this attitude, "I'm here because I have to." And worship for you has become a chore or something you just get done so you can feel like you've done your duty to God. God, forgive me for the times I've merely gone through the motions!

And then, maybe the most dangerous attack, the attack of the excuse. "I had a long night and am just too tired to go to church." "I have family in town and they want to do brunch this morning." "The kids take too long to get ready, so we'll be late." "We're going to be out of town this weekend on vacation (which is fine), so we'll take a vacation from God as well (which isn't so fine)." "I'll get there when I can (which is what more people today are classifying as "regular attendance")." And of course, just as dangerous is the non-excuse. "I know I should be in worship. I want to be there. I don't really know why I haven't been there."

I would guess any of those attacks might be ones you've faced. I know I have. You know, It's interesting how our verses here from Hebrews start out by talking about how now, because of what has been done for us, we can have the confidence to enter into God's Most Holy Place...the confidence to be in God's holy presence here and to know him, worship him, praise him. And yet, there've been times we've had the boldness to want to be away, to step away, to stay away...to not keep the Sabbath day holy as God commands it in his Word.

And for all the times we've failed to see the importance of worship and of being here, for all the times we've been tempted to give it up or get in the habit of not meeting together, you only need to read the next few verses of Hebrews 10 to see God's threat of punishment.

They say, ***"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy... How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."***

Why do you think Jesus is so serious about worship that he gives such a strong warning of intense penalty for failing to meet together, and I would add, failing to meet together regularly when we know that's exactly what God wants? And why place so much importance on worship?

Simply, because of what happens here. Our verses allude to some of those awesome features of worship. Let's take a look: ***"let us draw near to God...having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience ...let us not give up meeting together...let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...let us encourage each other."***

Did you catch the blessings of worship? I see two big ones...(1) guilty consciences cleansed by Jesus and (2) faithful living encouraged by each other. In other words, in worship, we are reminded, and even more, we receive again and again the forgiveness of sins from our loving Savior, and in worship, we receive spiritual encouragement from fellow believers in Christ. Where else can you consistently get that? Nowhere.

Jesus knows that. Jesus knows when you and I have failed to follow the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment and keep the Sabbath day holy. Jesus knows the harsh punishment from God we deserve for the times we've given worship up or haven't made a habit of it. And Jesus knew he was the only one who could keep the Sabbath holy...perfectly.

So he did...in your place. In fact, three of the gospel writers record Jesus calling himself the Lord of the Sabbath. And here's what the Lord of the Sabbath did for you. He provided access to God, from whom we had estranged ourselves with our sins...Jesus provided access to God through his death, namely, the sacrifice of his body and especially his blood, sprinkled on you, washing you clean, forgiving your sins, your guilt and shame for those times you've missed worship or maybe haven't given it the respect or priority in your life it deserves. Jesus forgave that.

And in addition to that, he made it possible for you to enter into God's holy presence with confidence and hold to the faith in him your profess unswervingly, that is, without wavering...all of that through his resurrection, which provides the only lasting guarantee that the path to a right relationship with God is open to us now and to eternity.

And we hear about that and are reminded about that...in worship. Jesus made your worship valuable by dying on the cross to take away your sins so now, when you worship, you have a place where you can have your sins forgiven...Sunday after Sunday.

And that's not all. Here is the place where we get to be encouraged by brothers and sisters in Christ, encourage each other in our faith walks, spur each other on to love and godly works. We get to be Christ's family here.

You know, sometimes, it's so easy to forget this aspect of worship. When people are looking for a new church, when people are asked why they belong to a certain church or why they come to church, you'll find a bevy of reasons. I prefer that kind of music. That church is welcoming. I'm here for the social aspect. I feel comfortable here. I appreciate the ministries they have here for me.

I won't discount any of those reasons, but you hear it don't you. We can get into the mindset that worship is all about me. But it's not. It's about our God who speaks to us in Word and Sacrament. It's about praising and thanking God for the wondrous works he has done. It's about encouraging and building up those who are sitting around me...and more and more as we see the Last Day quickly approaching.

And the amazing blessings is that through the gospel message proclaimed in worship here, I too am encouraged. I too am built up. I too am inspired.

So, back to our original question. Why worship? Why make it your habit, a regular, consistent part of your life?

Simply, Jesus wants it for you. Just look at all his urging. Psalm 122: ***"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'"*** And here: ***"Let us draw near to God...let us hold unswervingly to hope...let us consider how we may spur one another on...let us not give up meeting together...let us encourage one another."*** Jesus wants you to be in regular contact with his Word and Sacraments because through those means, and those means alone, you are forgiven and built up and strengthened in your faith in Jesus.

And not quite as importantly, I want it for you. I don't say it enough (and I know I don't), but I want you here. I miss you when you're not here. I miss out on sharing in Jesus' forgiveness with you. I miss out on encouraging you and being encouraged by you when you're not here. I need you here. And so do your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. And when you are, I rejoice. We all rejoice!

At AA, or after any journey to overcome addiction and kick a bad habit, after you've been sober for so long, there's usually a way to commemorate and celebrate your accomplishment. A coin, a certificate, something to remind you of your past struggles and your triumph.

Jesus has triumphed over sin, Satan, and death for you, friends. Here's your reminder of that eternal victory. But the struggle for us continues here on earth. And here, in worship, you are forgiven. You are empowered and encouraged to continue to fight the good fight here. So make worship your habit. Don't give it up. These are meetings you don't want to miss. So let's worship with each other and encourage each other until the Last Day approaches. Then, we will get to worship Jesus and serve him and praise him in heaven all our days. Amen.