

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
Acceptable Worship
Hebrews 12:18-29

The Apostle Paul writes to young Timothy, telling him “to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Timothy 4:13). Such public reading of the Scriptures must have been an extremely important part of the worship of the early church. So again today, in honor of God and his Word, would you stand and listen as Ed Anderson leads us in the reading of our passage. It’s found in Hebrews 12:18-29.

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. ²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire." Hebrews 12:18-29

What does it mean to worship God “acceptably with reverence and awe?” That is the primary question the writer is answering in this last warning passage of the book of Hebrews. Everything in these verses leads up to verse 28, “Therefore ... worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.” In other words, *we are to offer acceptable worship to God*. But just what does that mean?

Well, here’s a look at what it doesn’t mean. (DVD clip “It’s all about me!”)

If we are to worship God acceptably, we must first of all recognize that it’s not about us. Worship that is acceptable to God is not determined by what I consider to be “cool,” culturally relevant, personally pleasing, or emotionally stimulating. Acceptable worship is not first of all about you and me. It’s all about God!

Now, with that as a starting point, how do we worship God acceptably? We worship God acceptably ...

...by Worshiping (serving) with Reverence and Awe

Now there's a lot of room for misunderstanding here, so let's take a look at what I mean by that statement. In recent months, several have asked me about the meaning of *reverence* in worship. And in response, I've written an article that will be available on our web page in the coming weeks. You can also pick up a copy at information desk.

Let me just touch here on the key points. We want to be sure that we're guided by the Bible, and *not* mere personal opinion or preference. If you were to look up the seven times that the word "reverence" is used in the New International Version of the New Testament, you would discover that "reverence" speaks of heart attitude and obedience, and *not so much a particular form or expression of congregational worship*.

Reverence = heart attitude
≠ form or expression of congregational worship

This makes sense for two reasons. First, when it does come to congregational worship, there is never a hint in the Bible that one expression or form of worship is more reverent than another. For example, the following forms of worship are all mentioned and encouraged in the Bible: kneeling (Ps 95:6), lying prostrate (Dt 9:25), singing (Ps 95:8), clapping (Ps 47:1), dancing (Ps 149:3) and even shouting (Ps 81:1). One is not considered more reverent than another.

But second, and probably most importantly, the meaning of worship in the New Testament is so much more than singing, praying or reading God's Word. Worship is our entire life. In fact, that's why the majority of the translations of Hebrews 12:28 translate the word for worship as "service." In other words, to worship God acceptably is to live our entire lives acceptably to God. So Paul tells the Roman believers, "I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God." He then goes on to explain: "This is your reasonable service of worship."

So how do we worship God acceptably? By worshiping him with reverence and awe, i.e. serving him obediently with our whole heart.

But there is more. We also worship God acceptably ...

...by Recognizing Whom We Worship

We have a God who speaks. And he does not stutter. If we are not hearing, it's *not* because God has not spoken. It's because we are not listening!

Hebrews 12:18-24 describe God speaking to Moses and the Israelites as the Old Testament law was given. The detailed account is found in Exodus 19. The entire experience was frightening and overwhelming as Moses and the people were confronted by the pure holiness of God. We are told that there was a terrific thunder and lightening storm that engulfed the mountain as God came down to speak to Moses and the people.

Now I don't know about you, but I love thunder storms. We don't have many here in the Northwest. But when I was back in the Midwest in August, we saw an awesome storm move

through the plains of Kansas and Missouri. The clouds rolled in, the wind blew, and the lightning flashed all around us as we drove along.

But I'm sure that what Moses experienced was that multiplied a thousand times over. In fact, the text says that Moses trembled in his boots (or sandals!). And in the midst of the storm there was a trumpet blast. All the people stood around the foot of Mt. Sinai, gazing at the mountain billowing with smoke like a furnace. Then God told Moses to tell the people not even to approach the foot of the mountain. If they did – or if even an animal approached to close – they would be stoned or shot with arrows.

Apparently, crowd control is not a new problem! The Israelites wanted to get close and see; probably not because of a desire to be close to God, but simply out of curiosity. But the closer they got, the more they realized that they could not bear to hear the word of God.

Just like Moses and the people of Israel, you and I also come to a mountain to hear God speak. But our "mountain" is quite different! We come to a heavenly *location* – Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem which speaks of God's coming Kingdom that will be established on this earth. We also come to a heavenly *habitation*, myriads of angels. Myriads is the plural of the word for "ten thousand." In other words, a whole bunch! More angels than you can count! And this heavenly habitation is in heavenly *celebration*. Notice, it is a "joyful assembly." And if the Old Testament and the descriptions of worship in the book of Revelation are any indication of what that implies, some of us presently might feel a little awkward when it comes to heavenly celebration. And why are angels and people celebrating? Because we have a heavenly *provision*, the shed blood of Jesus Christ that speaks a far better word than the blood of Abel (12:24).

What does that mean? The blood of Abel cries out "Alienation!" – Alienation from his brother, Cain; alienation of Cain from God. But the blood of Christ cries out "Reconciliation!" – Reconciliation with God and among believers.

The blood of Abel cries out "Judgment!" – Judgment upon Cain and judgment upon humanity for wrong done and crimes committed. But the blood of Christ cries out "Acceptance!" – Because Christ paid the penalty and opens up the way for us to come to God without fearing his condemnation.

And so the writer concludes in verse 24: But we have come to "Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that *speaks a better word* than the blood of Abel."

The question for you and me is: *Am I listening to this "better word?"* You see, we worship God acceptably by serving him with wholehearted obedience. We worship God acceptably is by recognizing *whom* we worship. We worship God acceptably ...

...by Not Refusing Him Who Speaks

That brings us to the warning of verse 25: "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks." Again, would you say that with me: "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks."

We are in the fifth and last warning of this book. Wow! Can you believe we are nearly at the end? We've spent the greater part of this past year in this wonderful book. And I hope that it has spoken to you as it has to me.

In fact, if God hasn't spoken to you through this book, you need to ask yourself "Why?" For you see, that's the whole point of this final warning. There is always the danger of a subtle hardening of our hearts to bring us to the point of "refusing the One who speaks."

We see this in the progression of severity in the five warning passages of this book. (Chart). The danger of the first warning is *drifting* (2:1-4). And that happens so subtly, without us even realizing what is taking place. We pointed out that the word "drift" referred at times to a ring that could accidentally "slip off" your finger. It happens without you knowing it. The songwriter Robert Robinson, put it this way, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." In what area of your life are you starting to drift spiritually?

You better look out! Because the second warning of the book addresses what happens if don't catch ourselves in the tendency to drift. We begin to *grow hard of heart*. Drifting turns into hardening. Three times in chapters 3 and 4 we have the warning: "Do not harden your hearts" (3:8, 15; 4:7).

If we continue to harden our hearts to what God is saying, we run the danger of the third warning of this book: *falling away* (Hebrews 6:6). We begin to remove ourselves from both Christ, the head of the church, as well as from his Body, other believers.

But the downward trend doesn't stop there. The next step is to *deliberately sin* (10:26). This is explained in the fourth warning of Hebrews 10:19-39. And then finally we come to an absolute *refusal to hear* the One who speaks to us (10:25-29).

Do you get the point? We must take the warnings of this book seriously. Even the slightest compromise in our lives can set us on a disastrous path of "drifting" which leads to "hardening" which leads to "falling away" which leads to "deliberately sinning" which finally leads to "refusing" the voice of God in our lives.

So, "see to it that you do not refuse him who speaks." Would you say that again with me? "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks."

What does it mean to refuse him who speaks? For the unbeliever this can mean *rejecting* the message of the gospel. And if you're here today and have never received the gift of eternal life that God wants to give you, don't reject it any longer. The consequences are terrible. Receive it. The Bible says, "But as many as *received* Him, to those who believe on his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). In the name of Christ I urge you: believe and be saved! Don't put it off. Don't refuse the One who has been speaking to your heart. Place your faith in Christ today for salvation. If you don't, you face an eternity separated from your Creator God.

But to those who are already children of God, we "refuse him who speaks" not so much by *rejecting* his Word, but by *neglecting* his Word. Few of us here outright *reject* the truth. Some of

us may *neglect* the truth. Most of us don't *reject* the Bible. We just *neglect* our Bibles. And when we neglect God's Word, we are already beginning to drift.

How do we do that? Well, the most obvious way is by failing to expose ourselves to the "means of grace" that God has given us. What are these means of grace? There are basically three that are emphasized again and again in this book.

The first is the ***Word of God***. Turn back to Hebrews 4:12-13.

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4:12-13 *NIV*

Our biggest problems are not without, but within. It all comes down to a problem of the heart. And these verses tell us how God addresses that problem, performing "heart surgery" using the scalpel of his word.

Other books are interesting; but the Bible is living. Other books were given for our information; the Bible was given for our transformation. Martin Luther once said, "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me."ⁱ

God's Word penetrates to the dividing of "soul" and "spirit." It penetrates deeply into our lives, helping us distinguish between our God-given, innate, natural desires and emotions (our soul) and the higher spiritual purposes that God has for us (our spirit). As the light of God's Word shines in our heart, and as the hammer of God's Word softens our hearts, we begin to distinguish between the soul and the spirit. How? By letting God's Word sit as the ultimate judge of our hearts, desires, aspirations and decisions.ⁱⁱ

So open yourself (soul, mind, body, spirit, heart) to the surgical scalpel of God's word. Let it penetrate daily and deeply. Let it transform your life. Let it lay you bare. And then run to Jesus for his mercy and grace in time of need.

How do you do that? By the second means of grace: ***prayer to God***. Look at verse 16 of this same chapter: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). We are not like those under the Old Covenant, who approached God out of fear. We don't stand around at the foot of a mountain that speaks of law and condemnation, fearful that we might be zapped by the holiness of God. No, as this verse says, we can come to God's throne of grace *with confidence*. But do we do it? I believe that if we truly grasped the awesome privilege that we have to come before the Creator of the universe in prayer, we would not be able to restrain ourselves. Both personally and collectively we would "knock the doors down" to pray together!

The third means of grace that Hebrews emphasizes is the ***people of God***. The Word and prayer must be experienced in community. Personally, yes, but also in community. This was the problem these Hebrew believers were facing. They were pulling back from other believers. And

today, whenever I see believers beginning to miss the regular gathering of the church, that is a danger sign. Without fail (unless it is due to physical limitations), it is a sure sign of beginning to fall away. Remember, isolation from the Body of Christ is isolation from the person of Christ. The two are inseparable.

Hebrews 10:25 reminds us, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing; but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the day approaching.”

When you and I neglect these three means of grace, we are refusing the one who speaks to us in His Word. And this is a very serious thing. The writer goes on to say:

If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? Hebrews 10:25

Elsewhere, Paul speaks of those who will be saved, but “only as one *escaping* through the flames” (1 Corinthians 3: 15). He is saved, he escapes hell, but he does not escape the “just punishment” and the loss of reward spoken of in this book.

Remember, all the temporal things that could lead us to refuse the great Three-in-One who speaks to us are all going to be shaken up and pass away. As God’s voice shook the mountain upon which Moses stood, so “once more,” God says, “I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.”

God is saying: Live for my kingdom. Worship me acceptably. Serve me wholeheartedly. Recognize my voice. Don’t refuse me when I speak. Don’t settle for what is passing and temporary. Live for what is eternal. Receive my means of grace.

ⁱ Martin Luther, "Martin Luther--The Early Years," *Christian History*, no. 34.

ⁱⁱ For the following insights, I am dependant upon class note of Dr. Zane Hodges.