

## FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL LIVING

Week 3: Session 2- Loving God in return

The Practice of Passionate Worship

Lent 2 Year C

Gen 15:1-12,17-18; Ps 27; Phil 3:17-4:1; Lk 13:31-55

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### Luke 10: 25-28

<sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>26</sup> He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" <sup>27</sup> He answered, "**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.**" <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

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Over the last 25 years or so, the Uniting Church has undergone some difficult times. It has been forced, rightly or wrongly, to face some difficult issues. Not everyone has agreed with some of the decisions that have been made or have not been made at the highest levels of authority. I don't wish to debate the issues here, but rather to say that it is all too easy for the church and for individual people to be distracted from their primary task in their witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and their worship of God.

There are many things that can distract us in our Christian walk and even turn some off Christianity all together—particular theological and social issues, hypocrisy, or our own particular circumstances. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, was particularly concerned with the influence on the fledgling church, of false teaching. The Christians of Philippi had come out of a background and a culture of pagan worship. It was no small thing for them to have given that up and turn to Christ.

No doubt there were many times when it would have been easier for them to return to their old ways. So, when they faced various trials, like all of us, they needed guidance. Should they turn back to their old ways—ways that they were familiar with—ways that gave them acceptance within the community? Should they listen to some of those new travelling teachers that taught differently to Paul? Who should they turn to? Who should they follow?

There can be many times during our *own* Christian walk, when the journey becomes tiring and we begin to wonder just where we are going. Sometimes, the traditions of the church do not seem sufficient to support us in our new "enlightened age". We cry out in desperation and ask the question: "Who will guide me through this maze that we call 'the

Christian life?’ Is it worth the hassle of going to church, engaging in certain rituals and following certain behavioural rules? Would it be easier to just let it all slide? Perhaps the tele-evangelists that fill up our early morning TV have the answer. Should I listen to their ‘so-called’ wisdom or should I follow some other path.” In other words *“How can I find peace of mind in a world that seems to have gone mad—socially, politically and religiously?”*

Well, the world is full of ways of offering us peace of mind. You only have to look in the self-help section of a major bookstore to see the abundance of books that guarantee freedom of the mind and body—that offer new life if you do this or follow this pattern or life style.

Who could blame the Philippians for questioning how they were to understand the Christian life? They, unlike us, had no tradition to follow. Christianity was still new and they needed guidance. And so Paul has some very good advice, not only for them but also for us.

Sometimes it’s easier to comply with social culture rather than to stand against it. This is certainly one issue that the church (and not just the Uniting Church) needs to address. It’s all too easy to allow others to set the agenda for our Christian walk, rather than determining it for ourselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

False teachers include those who consider as priorities those things that are secondary to the gospel message. For the Philippians it was those who preached that Christians must also keep the requirements of the law. The problem of false teachers is still with us. In fact it’s probably worse now than it ever was. While these people claim to have special knowledge of the gospel, they are nevertheless, as Paul puts it, enemies of the gospel. They seek to win favour from people, rather than preach the truth. What they are preaching is, in fact, a gospel of self. We are to be on our guard against those who pretend to be on the straight and narrow, but who are, in reality, straying on pathways of their own making. For that we need the wisdom and discernment that comes from the Spirit of Christ.

By seeking to find fulfilment in the things of this earth, we are finding things that do not last. We are all exposed to the common troubles of this earthly life. We need food and drink and other necessities in order to survive—but we must, nevertheless, in our attitudes and passions live in heaven. As far as Paul is concerned, nothing is to be considered of any value except God’s spiritual kingdom—and even in this world, believers are called to live a heavenly life. The things of the world—our physical needs, our goals and earthly passions—will all one day pass away. Only that which is eternal will last.

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The question then arises, then. How do we do this? How do we live a heavenly life? The answer comes in our third week (or second lesson) in our *5 Practices of Fruitful Living* series: “Loving God in return (the practice of passionate worship)”. It’s in our worship of God that our heavenly life—a life that focuses on God and his kingdom—a life acted and lived in the real world—begins, takes shape, grows and matures.

Last week you will remember that we looked at the passage from 1 John, that states : “*We love because he first loved us.*” That is: that our love for God is predicated by his love for us. God’s love—displayed in his immeasurable grace offered to us freely and unconditionally—is the primal factor in our ability to love God in return. The primary way we do that is in our regular acts of worship.

Worship expresses our love for God in response to God’s great love for us. Worship, however, is not only an expression of our adoration of God but through it, we are empowered to love others and serve them also. Worship lifts us up, humbles us, motivates us, and pulls us out of ourselves. True and authentic worship changes us and, as a means of grace, it enables God to accomplish our re-creation in Christ’s image. It grounds us in who we are and what it means to be a child of God. And it provides the most likely setting for the change of heart and mind we seek in our being justified before God.

Worship reminds us that we belong to God and to one another, and that this sense of belonging is essential for our spiritual well-being. Throughout the Scriptures we see the repeated metaphors of unity—one body, one bread, one baptism, one God, one family in which we all are sisters and brothers in Christ—that weave us into a community of mutual care and compassion that sustains us.

Passionate Worship is a dynamic, vibrant expression of a fruitful relationship with God. It is *not* a routine or a performance-driven experience designed to make us feel good about ourselves. Nor is it an electrifying jolt to get us moving and recharged for the week to come. Not everything people call “worship” is necessarily that. It must be authentic. It must be grounded in the Scripture. It must be aligned with the truth of the gospel.

The purpose of worship is not just about what we do in our worship. Worship is also the means God uses to accomplish his purposes in the human heart—in *our* hearts—and in the community of faith—the church. It may surprise you to know that God is active in worship even when we are not. In worship, God speaks to us, and through our worship, accomplishes the continuing reconciliation of the world.

We all know that it's impossible to develop a meaningful relationship with someone if we don't spend time with them. The same is true with our relationship with God. While the primary worship experience of the church is our corporate worship each Sunday morning; daily prayer and private worship is also time with God and serves to prepare us for our corporate worship.

Passionate Worship requires us to surrender ourselves and our will—including all of the resistances to worship that will come our way—resistances that we will sometimes, perhaps often, experience. There will be external distractions and issues facing us that will hinder our worship—work, hobbies, sport etc. There will also be internal resistances—tiredness, apathy, bitterness etc.. Most people, at one time or another, backslide occasionally in their personal or public commitments to worship. Nevertheless, we should not be disheartened. We ought to persevere.

There is great mystery in worship. Somehow the practices we follow in our worship—the visible and tangible rituals and actions that we participate in—the prayers, the singing, the preaching etc, ought to result in us feeling sustained and connected to God and one-another. We ought also, to feel motivated to make better choices and experience God's call on our lives to serve. Worship is not merely a routine or performance, but a means of connecting to God. Passionate Worship feeds a dynamic, vibrant, fruitful relationship with God.

No matter what your particular practice of worship is, a pattern of passionate worship requires a surrendering of ourselves and of our will, a giving up of some good things in order to attend to greater things. People who practice passionate worship attend worship frequently and consistently until it becomes a valued and sustaining pattern for them. Worship becomes a priority in their life and they shift schedules to attend when conflicts arise. They love worship because they love God.

There are times when we might despair of many things in this life, but these are not the things that matter in the eternal scheme. These are not the things that give us purpose and direction. They are but fleeting concerns that will not last beyond the grave. They are but earthly things. But, while we have to live *in* this world for a time, we are, as Paul states, not *of* this world. While we are here for a time and are subject to earthly things, our citizenship is in heaven, and it is there, beginning in our worship, that we will find meaning and direction for our lives.

To God be all glory, honour majesty and praise. Amen.