

A Word-Shaped Liturgy (Hebrews 10:19-25)

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It's a joy to worship with you this morning, KingsWay. We finished our study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Living with the End in View, last Sunday. Before we jump into the Gospel of John in February, we're going to preach through a short, 7-week series entitled, "Sunday Matters."

Few traditions in the Christian faith are more widely embraced than the weekly rhythm of worship on the Lord's Day. You still don't have to look far to find a non-Christian who remembers grandma or another influential family member making them "go to church" on Sunday morning, and if they were really serious, maybe even Sunday evening and Wednesday evening. Did you know that if you grow up wearing your Sunday best and continue gathering with God's people once a week for the rest of your life, the average person will attend Sunday worship 4,056 times – minus weeks where you're sick, working, or out of town.

Anything we do that often easily becomes a mindless exercise, like eating breakfast or driving to work. Have you ever arrived in the parking lot at a job site or your office and realized, "I have absolutely no memory of any part of the drive." In similar fashion, there are plenty of Christians who get up on Sunday morning and go to church because it's just what you do. It's a habit.

A habit of regular Sunday worship is an exceedingly good thing. Mindless participation is not. Hebrews 11:6, "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." God isn't after your attendance, friend. He's after your heart. He's after your trust. He wants you to come here with eager expectation.

A family member recently sent my wife and I to see the Broadway musical, Hamilton. We showed up to the Altria Theater twenty minutes early and I'm glad we did because the place appeared to be sold out. The line just to get into the building stretched nearly an entire city block. The buzz in the air was palpable. You could feel the sense of anticipation. Perfect strangers seemed unusually chatty. And when the lights dimmed and the show finally started, the crowd roared. Why? Because they were excited to experience what they had been waiting to experience – a stunning combination of songs, costumes, lighting, and choreography.



As I look back, however, a peculiar sorrow rises in my heart. I find myself thinking, “Lord, why isn’t Sunday morning more like that?” Not in terms of the costumes and choreography. Praise God this isn’t a performance! I’m talking about a collective sense of eager expectation arising from the knowledge that what we’re participating in on Sunday morning is infinitely better than Hamilton. Cabinet meeting rap battles have nothing on what the Lord has granted us as a church.

Hebrews 12:22-24, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

If that is all true (and it is!), why do we chomp in line to see Hamilton but come straggling in on Sunday morning? Why do we walk into the Altria Theater brimming with expectation, but walk through the doors of the church compelled by little more than the force of habit? Or because you feel guilty if you don’t? Or because your parents or spouse dragged you out of bed? Or because you’re scheduled to serve on a ministry team?

By themselves, those are not good reasons to gather with the local assembly of the saints. Each of them, and a thousand more like them, reflect an absence of faith, the absence of earnest, eager expectation, informed by the Word of God, that God has something incredibly good in store for us as we gather for worship on Sunday morning.

We need to go back and remember, or maybe learn for the first time, why the weekly assembly of the people of God is so important, what we should expect God to do, and what God wants us to do when we gather. That’s our focus for the next 7 weeks. Sunday Matters. I’ll preach an introductory sermon today entitled, A Word-Shaped Liturgy. Then we’ll follow up with individual sermons – Preach the Word, Sing the Word, Pray the Word, Share the Word, and See the Word Parts 1 & 2, on the two sacraments of the church – baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Normally, I limit myself to expounding one text of Scripture when I preach. I’m convinced a regular diet of preaching sequentially through books of the Bible is the best way for me to serve you as a pastor. Occasionally, however, we do well to pause and consider, “What do various parts of the Bible have to say about a specific

topic?" That's the approach I'll take this morning. So let's consider our first question.

1) WHY DO WE GATHER AS A CHURCH ON SUNDAY?

In Exodus 20:8-11, the Lord commanded his people Israel, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work...For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

The Sabbath was a physical sign of spiritual dependence on the Lord. For the Israelites who had ears to hear, it served as weekly reminder to not hope in their work or their power to save themselves but in God's work and God's power to save them. After all, that's precisely what the first 7th day of creation in Genesis 2 was all about – God-centered joy in a work only God could complete.

Commanding Israel to follow his example was God's way of inviting Israel to share in his joy, a joy that required Israel to rest from her work and trust in his work. If she was willing to do so, she would experience something of the divine rest that God himself enjoys. Exodus 31:13, "Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD sanctify you."

Israel had no power to sanctify herself, no ability to make herself holy. Only God could restore all that sin had made wrong and lead her back into the spiritual rest of right relationship with himself. In that sense, the physical rest of the Sabbath pointed forward to the spiritual rest of the gospel. How so? Because it's ultimately through faith in the person and work of Christ that God sanctifies us, makes us holy as he is holy, and brings us into the divine rest he created us to enjoy!

On this side of the cross, we don't keep the 4th commandment by resting on the 7th day of the week. We keep the Sabbath by clinging to faith in Christ. Jesus is our Sabbath rest. But that raises an important question. If keeping Sabbath is all about clinging to faith in Christ, then why do we gather for worship on Sunday? It's all about me and Jesus, right? So why not put on some worship music, watch a sermon on YouTube, and do it all from the comfort of my couch with my coffee and slippers?



We gather for this reason. Clinging to faith in Christ, glorifying God by enjoying him forever, involves far more than you and Jesus. It involves his people because our identity in Christ is inescapably corporate. If right now you are clinging to faith in Christ, then you have been added to his people. You're part of his chosen bride, the church, which is why church membership is so important! It recognizes and gives tangible shape to the corporate reality the gospel creates. And God made us a people, he gave us a corporate identity so that we could proclaim the excellencies of Christ together.

1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." When we exalt and delight in Jesus together, he is glorified in a greater way than he would be if we tried to exalt and delight in him in isolation. And that, friends, is why heaven isn't filled with a bunch of isolated Christians enjoying Jesus. It's filled with a gathered assembly of the saints declaring the praises of God together.

Why do we gather as a church on Sunday? We gather as men and women who are clinging to Christ Jesus to express our corporate identity in Christ Jesus by together proclaiming the excellencies of Christ Jesus. So how do we do that?

2) WHAT SHOULD WE DO WHEN WE GATHER ON SUNDAY?

Here's where Hebrews 10:19-25 is so helpful. Look at verse 19. "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh..."

Under the Old Covenant, if you wanted to encounter God, if you wanted to enjoy his presence, you had to go to a physical meeting place – first the tabernacle and later on the temple in Jerusalem that replaced it. That temple was divided into multiple areas – the outer court (where Gentiles could worship) the inner court (where Israelites could worship), the holy place (where the Levitical priests could worship), and the most holy place (where only the high priest could worship, and that only once a year). The closer you were to the most holy place, the innermost room of the temple, the closer you were to God's presence.

A regular Israelite would never have dreamed of entering the holy places, let alone "with confidence." Only priests could do that and only after they had undergone an

extensive purification ritual. Why? Because sinful men cannot dwell in the presence of a holy God. The entire set-up communicated, as one of my 5-year-old son's favorite stories says, "It's wonderful to live in God's place again. But because of your sin, you can't come in."

So what did Jesus do? He made a way for all of us to go in and experience the fullness of unhindered relationship and fellowship with God. He lived a perfect life God requires. He died the substitutionary death our sin deserves. Why? So we could be forgiven, clothed in his righteousness, and draw near to the Father with confidence as his beloved children. Apart from Jesus, that's impossible! Through faith in him, however, we are "sprinkled clean from an evil conscience" (verse 22) and our bodies are "washed with pure water." Jesus does away completely with the sin that separates us from God.

So how do we respond? Three ways.

First, verse 22, we "draw near" to worship him. That isn't just something we do on Sundays when the band begins to play. It's something we do every moment of our life by living in a way that pleases God. Romans 12:1, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

What we seek to do on Sunday morning as a church is part of that. We're drawing near to worship God together – looking not to the pastor or the band to lead us into God's presence, but to Jesus, the Son of God, who brings us into God's presence and enables us to worship and please him in every moment of the meeting – not just when we're singing.

Second, verse 23, we "hold fast." More specifically, we "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." What's the "confession of our hope"? It's the person and work of Christ. "Holding fast the confession of our hope" means persevering in clinging to Jesus by faith. It means remembering and responding to the truth of the gospel, not just once or twice, but again and again and again – "without wavering."

So we draw near to worship and exalt the Lord. We remember and respond to the gospel. But there's a **third** thing we do in response to what God has done for us through the gospel. It's found in verses 24-25, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the



habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Friend, if you’re going to hold fast to Jesus, if you’re going to persevere in the obedience of faith, you need help – not occasionally – but continually. Listen to me very carefully. Meeting with the church, and the mutual encouragement and spiritual edification you will experience as a result, is God’s divinely appointed means of empowering you to persevere in the obedience of faith. Abandon the organized worship of the people of God and you will eventually abandon the faith. It’s that important.

You will not persevere in doing verse 23 – holding fast the confession of our hope – unless you persevere in doing verse 24-25 – gathering with the people of God for mutual encouragement and edification. So what should we do on Sunday morning? We should draw near to worship God, we should remember and respond to the truth of the gospel, and we should encourage one another to persevere in the obedience of faith. In other words, Sunday is all about glorifying God and edifying one another by remembering and responding to the gospel.

Thankfully, the Lord hasn’t left it up to us to decide what sort of activities enable us to get that done. He’s given us specific commands to govern our Sunday morning priorities. He’s told us to preach the Word (2 Timothy 4). He’s told us to sing the Word (Colossians 3). He’s told us to pray the Word (1 Timothy 2). He’s told us to read the Word (1 Timothy 4). He’s told us to share the Word (Acts 2), to seize opportunities for fellowship where we can speak the truth in love and to one another and exercise spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14). And he’s told us to see the Word, to set Christ before our eyes and a watching world through the sacraments of baptism (Romans 6) and the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11).

Every one of those divinely ordained activities help us to glorify God and edify one another by remembering and responding to the gospel. That’s God’s goal for our Sunday meetings. Glorify him. Edify one another. How? By remembering and responding to the gospel.

3) HOW DOES THE ORDER OF OUR SERVICE ACHIEVE GOD’S GOAL FOR OUR SERVICE?

If Sundays are about glorifying God and edifying one another by remembering and responding to the gospel, the order of our service is important. Why? Because the



gospel we gather to remember and to which we seek to respond through renewed love and obedience is not a random collection of facts. There is a logical structure, a necessary progression of thought in “the confession of our hope” we want to hold to and help each other hold to “without wavering.”

Think about it. If I were to say, “Tell me the gospel in less than 60 seconds,” what would you say? I find it helpful to summarize the good news of all Jesus has done to accomplish salvation for mankind in four words: God – Man – Christ – Response.

The gospel tells us that God, our Holy Creator, made us. Therefore, we are accountable to him. But that’s a problem, because none of us have submitted to his authority. We’ve all sinned. We’ve gone our own way and deserve his righteous judgment as a result. If that sounds like bad news to you, it is.

So what’s the good news? The good news is that Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, lived the life we were supposed to live, died the death we deserve to die, and rose from the grave proving that his life and death were sufficient to destroy the power of sin and make us right with God. Eternal life with God isn’t automatic, however. We must respond to Jesus by turning from sin and choosing to trust him as our Savior, a faith we demonstrate through persevering obedience.

The good news of the gospel is that what we could never do – make ourselves right with God – God himself has done for us. That’s the good news we want to remember and respond to Sunday after Sunday. Every part is true and the parts make the most sense in a particular order. In his book, *Christ-Centered Worship*, Bryan Chapell explains how the gospel gives structure to our corporate gatherings:

“Through the ages, the common pattern of the order of worship in the church reflects the pattern of the progress of the gospel in the heart. The gospel first affects the heart by enabling us to recognize who God is. When we truly understand the glory of his holiness, then we also recognize who we really are and confess our need of him. The gospel then assures us of the grace that he provides, and our hearts respond in both thanksgiving and humble petition for his aid so that we can give proper devotion to him. In response to our desire for his aid, God provides his Word. We heed his instruction, knowing that we are both charged to do so and have the promise of his blessing as we live for him. The common liturgy of the church through the ages reflects this sequential flow of the gospel in our hearts.”



Whether you're talking about the Roman Catholic church, Luther, Calvin, the Westminster divines, you name it, there is a consistent order of element in the historic liturgies of the Christian faith. It's not random. It's not haphazard. It's not worship – announcements – preaching. The order of service (the liturgy) is designed to help us remember and respond to the gospel.

Adoration comes first – a recognition of God's character. Then confession – an acknowledgement of our character. Then assurance – an affirmation of grace. Then thanksgiving – an expression of devotion to God. Then petition and intercession – a desire for aid in living for God. Then instruction from God's Word – acquiring knowledge for pleasing God. And they conclude with a charge and benediction – living unto God with his blessing.

Is a Sunday worship service with all of those elements explicitly required by God? No. It's a wisdom issue. Yet it makes sense that if God's goal for our time together is to help one another hold fast to Christ, the truth of who Jesus is and what he's done for us should inform not just the content of our meetings, but also the structure, the "container" as it were. If we want our lives to be shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ then our corporate worship must be shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let me give you an example from one of our Sunday services last month. I began by reading Psalm 33:1-12 which was a warm up act to help us all get settled in. When in doubt, read Scripture. No! That was very intentional. Psalm 33:1-12 reminds us of the majesty, authority, and power of God. That's where the gospel begins, so that's where we began. Then we sang "Glorious and Mighty," adoring the Lord for the very same attributes.

Then our brother Will Chapman shared a prayer of confession. We were not spectating while he talked to God. He was praying on our behalf and we were (Lord willing) praying with him. Then we sang I Will Wait for You. Did we do that because you have to go with something slow after an up-tempo opener? No! Verse 1, "Out of the depths I cry to you. In darkest places I will call. Incline your ear to me anew, and hear my cry for mercy Lord." What does that lyric do? It helps us, on the heels of confessing our sin, express our need for Christ's mercy!

But we don't stay there mired in need. We move into assurance and gratitude for Jesus' provision of the forgiveness and help we need! "So put your hope in God alone, take courage in his power to save, completely and forever won by Christ



emerging from the grave." Thank you, Lord, for the pardon of sin we have through the gospel!

Then I had planned on reading the rest of Psalm 33, but either because of deciding to linger more with the first two songs or because of spontaneous contribution in the form of a prophetic word – which we pray for and earnestly desire – I don't think I did. Instead, I introduced the offering, encouraging us to express our thanksgiving to the Lord through generous giving, and we sang Blessed Assurance. Why did we sing that song there and not at the beginning? Because until you've recounted the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, and the provision of God's grace in Christ, it's hard to sing, "Relieve my fears that I no more may doubt the love of Christ for me."

And by the way, you won't appreciate the significance of those words nearly as much if you walked in 15-20 minutes late that Sunday. Let me speak directly to that issue for just a moment. Friends, if you are consistently showing up late on Sunday morning, not because you had a family crisis or a 3-year-old meltdown, but simply because it's your habit, you're harming your own soul. Why do I say that? Because you are functionally saying you only need part of the gospel. You don't need to be reminded of God's holiness, confess your sin, and receive a fresh assurance of his pardon. It's not "just a couple songs." It's about holding fast to the whole confession of our faith.

But Matthew, you say, at least I made it in time for the sermon. I'm grateful you did. But your heart will not be properly prepared to hear the preaching of God's Word unless you participated in everything that came before the preaching of God's Word. And I haven't even mentioned the impossibility of encouraging a brother or sister before the service starts, welcoming a visitor, being used by the Lord to share a prophetic word, or pray for someone. If you consistently show up late, you're not just harming your own soul, missing out on the spiritual food you need, you're being selfish and limiting the Lord's ability to use you to edify his people.

I say that because I love you, and because I think you already know that, I'm not going to make a thousand qualifying remarks. Nor am I going to keep a record of who's hear at ten and who's not. I have no interest in that. What I am deeply interested in and fiercely committed to is making sure we don't allow laziness to hurt our own soul and unintentionally hurt others around us.



After we sang Blessed Assurance, Josh led us in a prayer of intercession. Why? Because that's what thanksgiving for God's blessings is meant to produce – a confident expectation and request for more good gifts from our Father in Heaven! Jody read Jonah 3-4 and Rick Zaman preached on the same, instructing us in how to identify self-righteousness in our lives and see the true depth of our need for God's mercy. What do you think we sang afterward? A Debtor to Mercy Alone.

Then Chris led us in sharing the Lord's Supper, a family meal instituted by our Savior King to help us remember and not forget both our need and his provision. We sang Jesus There's No One Like You to express our satisfaction and joy in him. And we ended by having Chris send us out with a benediction and charge. Was all of that planned? Not entirely, but largely. So why was it planned that way? To help us remember and respond to gospel – God, man, Christ, response. The order of our service helped us achieve God's goal for our service.

CONCLUSION

Why does Sunday matter? Because God commands us to exalt Jesus and edify one another by remembering and responding to the gospel. And that's not just something we have to do, friends. That's something we get to do. It is an incredible privilege to draw near to God with our brothers and sisters, enjoy his manifest presence corporately in a way that is altogether different than what we ever experience in isolation from one another. As we do that, the Lord helps us to hold fast to Christ and uses us to help others do the same.

You may gather with the people of God on Sunday morning a few thousand times before the Lord calls you home. Don't take a single one of them for granted. The gathered worship of the people of God is among his choicest means of keeping us faithful. Sunday matters. May it matter all the more to us over the next few weeks. What we experience here – if we're willing to see with the eye of faith – is so much better than Hamilton. Let's pray.