

## God-Pleasing Worship

*“The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor Me.”* We hear the words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson, and our minds *instantly* flood with a multitude of examples, both historical/biblical as well as very current and contemporary. Biblically/historically, you can’t escape the immediate context of this discourse. Jesus was speaking this to His apostles on Maundy Thursday evening, mere hours before *self-proclaimed God-loving men* like Pharisees, Sadducees, and High Priests do all they can in their power to make sure Jesus Himself is nailed to a cross. And why was there such a fevered push to exterminate Jesus? At the heart of it all, it was because, in their eyes, He was a *blasphemer*. *“Who does this guy think He is forgiving sins? Only God can do that! Who does this guy think He is saying, ‘before Abraham was, I am’? You don’t use the name of Yahweh—I am—EVER! That’s God’s name! Yahweh is very clear about the punishment for blasphemy. This guy needs to die.”*

Biblically/historically, there’s also the account of a certain young hot-shot Pharisee, who went by the name Saul. Remember his story? He was so very zealous for the right keeping of Torah, so zealous, in fact, that he secured written permission from the high priests to basically serve as a *bounty hunter and mercenary for God*, his “calling” and charge to hunt down all worshippers of Jesus and put them to death. He really thought he was serving God and being the best, most-faithful Jew God could ever hope for. Thank God Jesus set him straight, right? *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?”* And the rest, as they say, is history. *“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith”* (the words of St. Paul to the Philippians; 3:8-9).

Those are just two Biblical examples! That’s not even mentioning the likes of Peter, John, John the Baptist, Stephen, and all the other martyrs of the faith, killed not by Pagan hordes, *but by people who really thought they were serving God*. We can look historically, and many of our theological forefathers met with early deaths, not because they were battling crazed idol-worshippers, but because a few people in the Church didn’t like them and disagreed with them. A certain fellow by the name of *Martin Luther* comes to mind. Once he told the Roman Church that they had the Gospel of justification all wrong, he was forced to live out the rest of his life as a marked man. These “Christians” wanted nothing more than to make him the kindling at the next Vatican bonfire. God protected Luther.

Many faithful Christians, however, were martyred for holding firm to this same faith.

Of course, given our *current* realities, you can't help but associate these sobering words of Jesus with the bitter sufferings and deaths of faithful Christians being broadcast almost every single day in the media. You don't even have to dig deep in some obscure, conspiracy-theory kind of periodical. *Turn on your radio. Read the newspaper. Log into Facebook. Check your Twitter feed.* Christians are being persecuted day-in and day-out, sometimes in very barbaric and sickening ways, by people who really do think they're offering *righteous, holy service* to God by "slaughtering the infidel." Just look at the bulletin cover for this morning. *[ISIS on the beach with Christian captives]* We all know what's going in that picture, don't we? That horrific snapshot, recognized around the world, is a snapshot of Christ's words in action. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if some of you immediately went here in your minds when you first heard the Gospel lesson, the accounts of Jesus, Paul, Peter, and the like all being an "*oh yeah...*" kind of *afterthought*. That's how "in your face" and real this stuff is. We see it. These words of Jesus are playing out right *before our very eyes*. It's not just ancient history. This is present tense. These realities cause us to lose sleep and shed tears. These realities cause us to worry when we travel abroad or get in crowded spaces. People really are murdering other people because they think they're serving God.

But...as terrible and reprehensible as all this is, is this the *only* kind of "service" Jesus was referring to in these words? In a word, no. This is where the English translation kind of lets us down. We hear these words of Jesus, and we immediately think of doing evil, murderous deeds, as in people think they serve God by doing such wicked, murderous things. While this is *definitely* part of what Jesus is saying here, it's not the *only* thing He's saying here.

You see, the Greek word that Jesus uses here is "leitourgia," not "diakonia." There's a reason I share this with you. It matters. *Diakonia* is the word we often translate when we want to speak of providing service or care to others in need. We do "diakonia," works of mercy; works of service. But...that's **NOT** the word Jesus uses here. Jesus says that these wicked ones will murder, and deem it *leitourgia*, which is the word we most often translate as "worship."

I want you to think about that. Our worship is referred to as *leitourgia*. You can hear the word for "liturgy." Our service, our singing, our listening, our receiving, our praying to God: all *leitourgia*—worship. Now, I already know that you can easily identify such false and heretical worship/service in the horrific and murderous examples we've already named, from what was done against Jesus, done by S(P)aul, done against Luther, all the way to what ISIS carries out on an all too routine basis today. We get all that. Whether it's *diakonia* or *leitourgia*, it's

all evil, it's all murder, and it's all against God, even though it's done in service to God. We get it.

***But...what about us?*** Can we, too, fall into this category, firmly believing that we're worshiping and serving and praising God with good words and deeds, when in reality we're actually killing and putting to death the good things and good people of God? Perhaps the easiest way to come at this is by simply asking: Who/What is at the center of your worship? Is the Word of God at the center? Are His holy and life-giving sacraments at the center of your worship? **I wouldn't be too quick to answer.** Character assassinations happen all the time, and we Christians can be real mercenaries when we don't get our way; ***when our ways and wants and desires aren't at the center.*** "*How long, O Lord?! How long will you allow your faithful servant to be slaughtered by these heartless, uncaring, unfaithful Judases and Jezebels?! How long, O Lord, will these hypocrites kill us with their wicked ways?*" You know...a little leaven leavens the whole lump. It only takes a little bit of dissatisfied, self-centered infection to kill and destroy the body of Christ that is the Christian congregation. It happens all the time, and it happens for ***all the wrong, self-centered reasons and best intentions.***

So I'll ask again: Who/What is at the center of your worship? Is the Word of God at the center? Every Christian is quick to say, "*It's all about Jesus.*" **Is it?** Are His holy and life-giving sacraments at the center of your worship? Is this (Word and Sacrament) where you point people to? Is this what you hunger and thirst for... or do you have other itches that these just can't scratch?

**Guys: This is what it's all about.** This is what worship—true God-pleasing worship—is all about. It's centered on Christ. It focuses on Christ. It gathers around Christ and His Word, His Baptism, His body, His blood...His forgiveness. True worship repents. True and faithful worship doesn't attempt to justify the sin or explain it away, or worse yet, just ignore it or turn a blind eye to it. True and faithful worship confesses the sin, and then calls out to God to be merciful, not for the sake of the sinner, ***but for the sake of Jesus Christ alone.*** True and faithful worship holds fast to Christ's all-redeeming sacrifice alone. It rejoices in Christ and His gifts and His grace, mercy, and peace. Here it is. Here He is, right where He has promised to be—Word and Sacrament.

"*I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.*" Jesus doesn't mince words, does He? Jesus tells it like it is. Here is the reality of ***true, God-pleasing, Christ-centered worship.*** This is what it's all about. And... **WHEN** others reject and rebel and fight and slander and divide and murder and act the Old Adam enemies of God that they are by nature; enemies who still want to be in charge and in control and like God, ***all with the very best worshipful, God-pleasing intentions, of course...be at peace.*** "*I am with you always, even to the end of the ages.*" Here He is. Here is Christ, holding out to you His pierced

hands, reaching out to you to embrace you, protect you, feed you, nourish you, and love you.

You know...when you faithfully recognize this blessed Christ-centered reality, *how can you not be at peace?* How can you not rejoice, even as you bear your crosses; even as you're being slaughtered like a lamb all the day long? When you understand and recognize all this, how can you not want to shout it from the rooftops and want everyone to have this same peace and joy? This [Word and Sacrament/Crucifix] kind of puts everything else in life in proper perspective, doesn't it? I pray that this proper, cruciform perspective is your perspective, your focus, your joy, your assurance, and your peace, now and into all eternity.

**AMEN**