

# *Your Single Most Important Habit*

## *Part 1 – It's Better When You're Here*

Psalm 95 ~ Hebrews 10:19-25

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 6, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>19</sup>Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup>by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), <sup>21</sup>and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup>let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup>Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup>And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:19-25, NRSV)



I want to introduce you to a new piece of technology that is changing the Sunday morning worship experience for lots and lots of people. Virtual reality is a computer-generated experience that takes place within a simulated environment. Basically it allows you to experience something without really experiencing it, to be somewhere without really being there. It was just a matter of time before this technology would be applied to Sunday mornings. Take a look.

*Watch clip at:*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R\\_bkNkrWdz8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_bkNkrWdz8)

Just to be clear, this is a joke. Virtual Reality Church doesn't exist...yet. But in a culture like ours that is so slanted towards individualism, customization, and instant-gratification it probably is just a matter of time. In some ways, you already can create your own customized worship experience from the comfort of your couch. Download some of your favorite Christian music or put on a CD full of the classic hymns you love. Listen to a podcast from one of the many world-class preachers available online. No reason you can't read scripture and pray on your own, the very same scriptures and prayers that are read and prayed here in church. With all that, you really could worship from the comfort of your couch.

So what are we doing here this morning? Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, why do we keep gathering in this

place? It's a lot of effort, right? Think of the work that goes into putting together just one Sunday morning worship service. And you had to get up on your day off, get dressed up (sort of), drive over here in the rain, participate in a service that somebody else put together with songs you might not have chosen yourself and sermon topics you might not have selected and prayers that may not even line up the things you want to pray about. That's a lot of effort. So what are we doing here?

The church spends so much time committed to this practice of Sunday morning worship it's worth at least asking the question from time to time, which is what we're going to do these next few weeks. We know that there must be something of value here, or at least we've been told that there is something of value here. Every pastor I know has had this experience in the grocery store countless times. You see somebody from the church who wasn't in worship last Sunday, or maybe hasn't been in worship for some time. As you approach them in the frozen food aisle you know what's coming. You are about to hear an excuse why that person wasn't in worship. I have heard a wide variety of excuses over the years, some very creative. Nobody, however, has just told me straight out that they believe worship is waste of time. There is something in most Christians that still believes there are some very good reasons for what we are doing here this morning.

But what are they? Author Tony Robbins says, "Activity without purpose is the drain of your life." I think he's probably right. Plenty of people identify as Christians but don't participate in the life of the church. Plenty of church members claim to follow Christ but make their participation in gathered worship sporadic at best. If we are going to gather as we do Sunday after Sunday, we ought to have a very clear understanding of our purpose when we do gather.

To answer that question, let's start at the beginning. Genesis tells us that God created the world in six days but then, on the seventh day, chose to rest.<sup>1</sup> It's not

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<sup>1</sup> **“And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.” –**

Genesis 2:2 (This and all other biblical citations from the NRSV)

that God was tired, but rather that God was establishing a life-giving pattern for his creation to follow. The Fourth Commandment eventually spelled it out for us: **“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup>But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.”**<sup>2</sup> Every seventh day we are commanded to stop our work – our striving, our accomplishing, our building – and give God our honor in worship. It’s a reminder that God is God and we are not. That makes worship a response. Do you see that? God creates, and then we worship as a response to the one who has created. We praise. We thank. We honor. We adore. We stand in awe.

Did you notice how Psalm 95, which we used to call us to worship this morning, follows this same pattern? In the first few verses we are told to **“sing to the Lord...a joyful noise”** and to **“come into his presence with thanksgiving”**. Why? The next verses tell us why: **“In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.”**<sup>3</sup> Do you see it? Worship is a response. God initiates and we respond in worship. It’s never the other way around. We are never the initiators. We don’t worship God to get him to create, or to bless, or to save, or to redeem. We worship in response to the fact that he has *already done* these things.

Our text from Hebrews makes this same point. To set the context for this passage, the entire letter of Hebrews is an appeal specifically to the Jews of that day that salvation has come through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who was the Christ. The letter is full of Jewish imagery, especially emphasizing Temple practices of sacrifice. In those days there hung a giant curtain in the Jerusalem Temple which completely separated the innermost part of the Temple, the so-called Holy of Holies, which the Jews believed was the place on earth where God was most present. The massive curtain was there to remind them that their sin kept them separate from God’s presence. But this very same curtain is the one the Gospel writers tell us was torn in two from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus’ death.<sup>4</sup> Because of Christ’s sacrifice, *because of what God had done through Christ*, a way was made for not only Israel, but the whole world to come back into the presence of God.

So when the writer of Hebrews proclaims here that we can **“enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus”**, and **“approach [God] with a true heart in full assurance**

**of faith”**, he is urging us towards worship but also reminding us that our worship is a response to God’s initiative. Christ sacrificed everything before we did a thing. In no way did we deserve or earn such a gift. Just as creation was a gift, so is new creation. Our worship, including our gathered worship on the Sabbath, is a response to that which God has already done.

Let us then never imagine that in showing up for worship on a Sunday morning in church that in some way we are checking a box, earning points in heaven, putting ourselves in God’s favor. God does not love or favor you more because you are here this morning. There are not points for attendance. You are here this morning, I hope, because you have come to recognize that God loved you and favored you long before you even gave him a second thought. Imagine running up to hug the lifeguard who just saved your child from drowning because you want to get on her good side so that she might save your child from drowning in the future. That’s like the person who shows up to worship because he or she wants to get in God’s good graces. That person has it all backwards. He or she has not yet believed the Christian Gospel, which is the good news about what *God has already done!* God initiates, and our worship is always a response to God’s initiative.

For this reason God’s people, from Israel on down, have always gathered regularly to worship. In fact, when God created us I think God knew that we probably couldn’t go much more than six days or so without beginning to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are the initiators. So every seventh day we are commanded to stop, and rest, and gather, and worship the God who has created us, and redeemed us, and now sustains us in every way.

Remember that Jesus himself gathered with the community every Sabbath day. Luke 4:16 tells us, **“When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom.”**<sup>5</sup> Jesus’ first followers, the early church, continued this practice of gathering regularly to worship. Acts 2:46-47 reads, **“Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”** Though the settings for worship these days look fantastically different – in sanctuaries like this one, great cathedrals, rented store fronts, city parks, secret house meetings, under the great tree in the center of the village –in all sorts of places the church continues to faithfully gather

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:8-10

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 95:4-5

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Mark 15:38.

<sup>5</sup> Emphases mine.

sabbath after sabbath to respond in worship to God's gracious initiative.

But here is a concern I have, one that is shared by many others besides me. In our corner of the world, less and less of the church is gathering like this for worship. I could quote you statistics all day long to make this point. And I'm not talking about the general culture, but about Christians, those who claim devotion to Christ, even those who are members of Christian churches. For many, many Christians in the west this practice of gathering for worship has become less habit and more option. On any given Sunday, in fact, significantly less than half of all those in America who are members of churches are actually present in worship.

To some extent this has been my experience here at Faith these last 15 years. I've watched it happen. This is particularly true of our younger members. On any given Sunday there is a significant portion of our congregation who are not gathered here with us on the Sabbath. Up to half of our church not sharing in our prayers. Half missing the message of the scripture and sermon. Half not gathered with us around the Lord's Table.

There are lots of reasons for this, some legitimate. In some cases, however, people have lost hold of what it is that God has done for us. I mean, for the Christian who truly grasps the gift we have been given in Christ, Sunday can't come quick enough. In other cases, people have lost hold of what God has commanded us, for remember that setting aside the Sabbath to rest and to honor God in worship is not a suggestion but a commandment. Finally, I think some people just don't see the value in it all, or at least enough value in it to make worship a priority when other options present themselves.

This isn't a new problem. Maybe you picked that up in the Hebrews reading. Again, the writer urges, "**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**" Even in those days some had got into the habit of skipping out on Sabbath worship. I imagine Peter in the Jerusalem marketplace on Monday morning bumping into Zebadiah who immediately jumps to an explanation for their absence the day before, something about a really busy weekend, or tickets to a football game, or his kid's travel team had a Sunday morning tournament over in Bethlehem.

Keep in mind that in those days it was highly dangerous for the church to gather. Christians were being imprisoned and executed regularly. Yet even in those circumstances the church is encouraged not to give up meeting together to worship! The biblical writers clearly understand not only that gathered worship has always been the natural human response to divine initiative and that God himself commands such, but they also understand the value of this weekly practice in its own right. In the time I have left, therefore, I want to briefly touch on four reasons I believe what we are doing this morning is of tremendous value. Keep in mind that even if we could find no obvious value in it, the fact that God commands us to honor him on the Sabbath would be reason enough to do so. In other words, our primary reason to gather for worship is not to get something out of worship. The fact that we do get something out of it, however, only ought to increase our motivation to gather!

First, it is in gathered worship that the church experiences an unparalleled means of grace. There are of course many means, or ways, through which God supplies us with his grace, his power, his forgiveness, his very presence. But in shared worship, four of the most essential means of grace become uniquely available to us all at once. On Sunday mornings here we are exposed to God's voice through the reading and proclamation of God's Word, we lift our own voices and hearts back up to God in prayer, we are nourished by the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and in all of it we do so together as the body of Christ.

God's Word, prayer, sacrament and fellowship, in what other practice can the church experience all four of these at once? Only in gathered worship. I actually think we have little idea the sort of grace God is ready to pour out on us when we gather together in the response of worship. Grace, of course, flows freely everywhere because God is everywhere. Still, I wonder if God's grace flows most freely when his people gather to worship.

Second, it is in gathered worship that the church regularly recalibrates truth. It doesn't matter where or how you spend your week, the world around you is going to assault your faith and can often, even in a week's time, leave you in a spiritual fog. The American pastor and author, A.W. Tozer, once wrote, "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of him." The world around us, and sometimes the world within us, is forever presenting to us thoughts about God that are unworthy of him because they are untrue. If you follow God, God will make your life easy, or at least easier. God is whatever you want God to be. God favors some

people over other people, and those people over there are probably in that second category. What you have done is beyond God's forgiveness.

We are assaulted day in and day out with so many messages like these that twist and compromise the truth about God. It's why the writer here in Hebrews encourages us to "**hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.**" It's why Psalm 95 includes the plea, "**O that today you would listen to his voice!**" And as we gather together in worship we do exactly that. We listen to God's Word in scripture. We call, and train, and give time to pastors who can then prayerfully study and interpret God's Word for us so that we better understand the confession of our hope to which we are called to hold fast. Sunday after Sunday, the thoughts unworthy of God are challenged and dismissed that we might emerge from whatever spiritual fog has descended upon us.

Third, it is in gathered worship that the church offers encouragement to the disheartened. Which one of us has not struggled in our faith at times? I have struggled in my faith even recently. There are just some days and some seasons where I find it hard to believe, hard to take the next step of faith, hard to be encouraged. I'm not the only one. In those seasons of discouragement we need the community of faith around us. Remember, we were not made to walk with God alone. In the beginning, when God created Adam, you would have thought that might be enough. It's God and Adam in paradise together. And yet, even before the paint is dry on this man God has created, God looks at Adam and declares "**It is not good that the man should be alone.**"<sup>6</sup> As I talked about at Christmas, we were made *from* community *for* community, made from a God who lives in the eternal community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and made for a life meant to be shared with him and one another.

The Christian life literally cannot be lived in isolation. We need one another. When we struggle in faith we need others to encourage us. When we are alive with faith others need us to encourage them. As we gather in worship and sing together, and speak the creeds together, and sit under God's Word together, and pray together, and speak peace to one another, we do exactly that. The great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, once concluded, "At home, in my house, there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through." Even if Virtual Reality Church had been available to Luther, I'm sure he would have passed on it. One of my prayers every Sunday morning is that every person who gathers with

us in this space will walk out of here more encouraged than they were when they came in. I hope that is true for you today.

Fourth, it is in gathered worship that the body of Christ, the church, is unified. The New Testament is full of injunctions for the church to be unified in thinking and purpose. I think of Paul's words in I Corinthians 1:10: "**I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.**" How much more effective the church can be in our work and witness when we are united in this way. However, when a congregation is rarely if ever all gathered together, this unity is very difficult to achieve.

Nearly every Sunday I have a clear sense that a sermon I have been given to preach carries a message Christ has given specifically for our church on that day. Today is a good example of that. I believe, using today's example, that God is calling our congregation at this time to a renewed commitment to gathered worship together. The problem is that only half our congregation will hear that message today. I'm aware of this every time I preach.

When at all possible, Esther and I don't have important conversations about important matters that affect our whole family unless the whole family there. All six of us need to be on the same page. While I know that the circumstances of life – health issues among them – make it literally impossible for our entire congregation to ever be all in the same room together, the more of us who are together more of the time, the more we become unified in the thinking and direction God has for us. Obviously, our best chance for that to happen is Sunday mornings.<sup>7</sup>

Unparalleled means of grace. Recalibration of the truth. Encouragement for the disheartened. Unity in the body of Christ. These are just some of the benefits we gain from regularly gathering for worship together. And again, all these are on top of the main reason we gather, which is to praise and honor in worship the God who has made us, saved us, sustains us, and is coming back for us. It's enough to lead me to suggest that the

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Kelly writes, "A quickening Presence pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and isolation of our individual lives and blending our spirits within a superindividual Life and Power. An objective, dynamic, Presence enfolds us all, nourishes our souls, speaks glad, unutterable comfort with us, and quickens us in depths that had before been slumbering."

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 2:18.

gathering in weekly worship in the church probably ought to be the single most important habit you develop in your life. It's at least near the top of the list.

For this reason I want to offer you a very simple and tangible challenge at the beginning of this new year. Every January 1<sup>st</sup> I go through my Daytimer – yes, I still use a paper calendar – and mark all the most important dates of the year, especially birthdays and anniversaries. I had my wedding anniversary sneak up on me some years ago – realized it the day before actually – and I don't want to let that happen again. So here's my challenge. If you keep a paper calendar like me, go through every Sunday morning and mark in your appointments for gathered worship. 52 Sundays, 52 appointments with this congregation. If you keep your calendar digitally, do the same thing on whatever device you use. If nothing else, set an alarm every Saturday night on your phone to remind you what you have planned for the next morning. I'm serious. I'm literally asking you to mark these 52 Sundays in your 2019 calendar, and ideally to do so when you go home this afternoon. This might just be the most tangible sermon application I've ever given.

I know that for some of you this almost isn't necessary. There are many in our congregation for whom gathered worship is already the most important habit you have developed and you don't have to even think about where you are going to be Sunday morning. If there is any sermon ever that was preached to the choir, this might be the one! After all, you all are the ones who are here today, and many of you are here Sunday after Sunday. In fact, some of you go to great effort and overcome significant health and transportation obstacles to make sure you are here. You inspire me.

For some of us here, however, or others who may hear or read this message later, this will be a difficult challenge. Gathered worship has not been the priority God wants it to be in your life and so some adjustment, perhaps significant adjustment, is going to be necessary. You may even have some Sunday morning commitments elsewhere you've already made these next few months. That's why I encourage you to schedule out the whole year, far beyond any of those present conflicts. In time, as you make this a habit in your life, you also won't need those calendar reminders. Like for many here, being anywhere else Sunday morning will seem as strange to you as going to bed with your shoes on.

If we do not make this habit intentional in this way, if we leave it open-ended Sunday after Sunday, excuse after excuse will keep you away. That's how habits work. This is not a decision you should be revisiting every weekend, asking on Saturday night, "Should we

go to worship tomorrow morning?" That should not be a question we are ever asking because it betrays a serious misunderstanding of what is happening here when we do gather. Now of course life gets in the way sometimes. We get sick. From time to time there are commitments we must keep that take us out of worship on a Sunday. Most of us travel once in a while, at least for vacation. But even when you're on the road I encourage you to do what our family does and go find a local congregation nearby to join for worship. Preferably, find a congregation that's quite different from this one. You will be blessed by them and likely be a blessing to them as you join them.

I do not want you to leave here feeling guilty. If you feel guilty right now, stop it. Guilt is a lousy motivator, especially for worship! Instead, I pray you will leave here inspired, inspired as you are reminded again about all that God, in Christ, has done for us, inspired enough to be drawn eagerly to respond in worship alongside others who have been saved as well. I also hope you are also inspired as you recognize all that God is doing in and through us as we do gather, forming us into his people, blessing us so that we will in turn be sent out to be a blessing.

C.S. Lewis, in reflecting on the value of the gathered community in his life, once remarked, "The more we share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall have." I love that. We are created from and for communion. It is in our gathering where Christ is most glorified, and where we are most edified. This is why I often close my weekly Friday emails to you by reminding you as we look forward to Sunday that it is better when you're here. It really is. Better for you, yes. But also better for us.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Hebrews 10:19-25 again. What part of this passage stands out to you today?
2. Even in the early church people apparently were in the habit of neglecting gathered worship. Today less than half of Christians in American are in worship on any given Sunday. Why do Christians so easily tend to get in this habit?

3. What is *your* motivation to come to worship on Sunday mornings? Do you think of it primarily as the natural response to God's initiative?
4. Jeff mentioned four benefits of gathering for worship as a congregation: unparalleled means of grace; recalibration of truth; encouragement for the disheartened; unity for the body of Christ. Which one of these benefits do you most regularly experience in worship?
5. Psalm 95 begins: "**O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!**" Does this describe your attitude when you come to worship on Sunday morning? Why or why not?
6. Author Don Whitney says, "There's an element of worship and Christianity that cannot be experienced in private worship or by watching worship. There are some graces and blessings that God gives only in 'the meeting together' with other believers." Do you agree? If so, what are those graces and blessings that can only come when we gather together for worship?
7. How do you feel about the challenge to make a date for gathered worship in your calendar on every Sunday in 2019? Will you? Have you? Why or why not?
8. What is one way this message has changed the way you think about things? How will that change the way you live?

### **Table to Table Question**

#### ***A question for kids and adults to answer together***

Why do we go to church every Sunday mornings? Why is this so important for our family?