

The Worship that God Accepts

Text: Psalm 24; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 35

Speaker: Rev. Angus Stewart

If one word could be said to sum up the second commandment, that word is *worship*. Let me read you the second commandment (think *worship*): “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.” The reasoning follows: “For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.” Lord’s Day 35 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* treats this commandment: “What doth God require in the second commandment? That we in no wise represent God by images, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded in His Word” (Q&A 96).

The distinction between the first and second commandments is important. The first, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” is first because it is most basic. But the second is longer, including a warning against false worship – “[I am] a jealous God” – and a gracious promise – “showing mercy unto thousands.” And there is a heart diagnosis: those who worship contrary to God’s Word “hate” Him, while those who worship as He commands “love” Him. Thus, we examine our worship and the heart whence it comes.

Let us consider the worship God accepts – at church, through the week, and at the Lord’s Supper. Three short questions guide us: Where is true worship offered? Through whom is it offered? and from whom does it arise?

Where?

In the Old Testament, worship involved *place*. The tabernacle had two key chambers: the holy place and the holy of holies, where the ark of God resided. This was God’s throne, footstool, and chariot. Access was through two altars – the altar of burnt offering, pointing to Christ’s atonement, and the altar of incense, signifying intercession. With the temple, worship became fixed: massive, polished stones replaced tent poles. But most Israelites – 99.9% – were barred from entering the holy place, let alone the holy of holies. They were limited to the outer courts.

But the New Testament teaches a better place of worship. Hebrews 10 proclaims, "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus" (v. 19; NB. "the holiest" –not merely comparative, but superlative). How? "By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh" (v. 20). Christ's incarnation, sacrifice, and priesthood grant believers entrance to the true sanctuary.

Verse 21 speaks of "an high priest over the house of God." And so we are commanded: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water" (v. 22). This is cross-centred worship. Verse 10 says, "By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Verse 16 speaks of *new covenant* worship: "I will put my laws into their hearts." And verse 17 adds, "Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more." *This* is the worship of the justified.

Hebrews 12 expands this "where": "Ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (v. 22). We come into the presence of "an innumerable company of angels, the general assembly and church of the firstborn... to God the Judge of all... to the spirits of just men made perfect... to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling" (vv. 22-24).

This is the true place of worship: *heaven*. It's not just that God is supremely manifested there—it's that we *ascend* there by faith. Worship that doesn't rise to heaven isn't true worship. We don't need Levitical gatekeepers. Hebrews 10:19 says we have "boldness to enter into the holiest." Premillennialism errs in teaching a future temple in Jerusalem for worship. That's not Hebrews 10. That's a regression from new covenant worship to the old.

Even the Old Testament saints knew that heaven is God's true dwelling. Solomon confessed at the dedication of the temple, "Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded" (I Kings 8:27). Jonah, from the belly of the fish, declared, "My prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple" (Jonah 2:7). Isaiah 57:15 declares: "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit."

Psalm 24:3 asks, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place?" The tabernacle and temple have passed. Their true fulfilment is heaven, where Christ sits at God's right hand.

Eastern Orthodoxy senses that worship must be heavenly. Icons, said to be *windows to heaven*, are intended to foster that connection. But this contradicts Lord's Day 35: "Are images then not at all to be made? God neither can nor may be represented by any means... God will have His people taught not by dumb images but by the lively preaching of His Word" (Q&A 97). The instinct is right—worship is heavenly. The method is wrong—images violate the commandment.

What about contemporary worship? If Eastern Orthodoxy offers a misguided imitation of heaven, contemporary worship imitates a disco. Deafening music, flashing lights, dancing. What is their idea of heaven? A nightclub? Psalm 2:11 says, "Serve the Lord *with fear*, and rejoice with *trembling*."

And what of church buildings? Some of the best worship has been offered in caves, upper rooms, or jungles. Buildings don't sanctify worship. That's pagan. But church buildings are useful—they show stability, provide convenience, and aid worship practically. Yet, the building doesn't make the worship holy. *Heaven* does.

Through Whom?

How can earthbound sinners possibly ascend into heaven in worship? The answer begins with Jesus Christ. He died, rose again, and ascended bodily into heaven. He is there now. The next step is union with Christ. Every regenerate believer is spiritually united to Christ. "Your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). Our life is in heaven—*in Him*.

Then comes faith. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Faith deals with *unseen* things, *eternal* realities. Faith lays hold of Christ in heaven. Hebrews 10:19 again: "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus." We come by "a new and living way... through the veil, that is to say, his flesh." He is the "high priest over the house of God."

The exhortation is: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (v. 22). The Holy Spirit gives the assurance and conviction that we are indeed coming to God. Hebrews 12 confirms: "Ye are come unto mount Zion... [to] the living God... to Jesus the mediator." We come by *faith*. This is how the Christian worships: *spiritually, in Christ, by faith*.

This is also echoed in our Lord's Supper form. Before breaking the bread and pouring the wine, we are exhorted: "Let us not cleave with our hearts unto the

external bread and wine, but lift them up on high in heaven, where Christ is our Advocate at the right hand of His heavenly Father." Though we sit on earth and eat bread with our mouths, our hearts are in heaven. Without this lifting up, there is no worship. The articles of our faith all lead us there.

Psalm 24:3 again asks, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?" The primary answer is Jesus Christ. Verses 7-10 portray His entrance into heaven: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates... and the King of glory shall come in." Who is He? "The LORD strong and mighty... the LORD of hosts." He enters as the conquering King.

From Whom?

Yet Psalm 24 doesn't only speak of Christ. It speaks also of believers. Verses 3-6 refer to the individual: "He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully." Then verse 6: "This is the generation of them that seek him."

Verses 7-10 focus on Christ: "The King of glory shall come in." So we ask, how are the two connected? We enter God's holy place *because Christ entered first*. He is the forerunner. We are in Him, and therefore we ascend too—in death, and in worship. The repetition of "King of glory" five times in those verses is deliberate. He is the King of the kingdom of heaven under the triune God. Revelation 21 says "the kings of the earth" enter the new Jerusalem (v. 24). These are believers, kings in Christ. They ascend in Him.

Moreover, Psalm 24 emphasises character: "Clean hands and a pure heart." That's our life and our inward motives. "Who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully." That's our vows—baptismal, membership, marriage. We ascend in Christ, but not to live like the devil. If our life is wicked, then our faith isn't active and our worship falters. Faith draws near to God in Christ. But sin hinders that.

Let us examine ourselves. The question remains: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?" The answer is: Jesus Christ first—and we, in Him, through faith, with clean hands and pure hearts.

Our Father in heaven, cleanse us of all sin; help us to understand the truth of worship and, even more important to us as sinful people, help us to worship Thee this way, to not merely understand but to do it. For we ask it in Jesus Christ's name, Amen.