

PROPER CONDUCT IN GOD'S HOUSE

Today's Text: Habakkuk Chap. 2

Extracts:

But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silent before Him [Hab. 2: 20]

I recall what we as students used to do in the teacher training institution that I attended in Nigeria in the 1960's. It was run by missionaries with little or no government funding. The principal, a priest, was a very strict disciplinarian. One important daily activity for every student was compulsory church attendance in the nearby parish church at six in the morning and seven in the evening. We came to hate it, especially during the cold and dry Harmattan season (November-January). The evening service did not allow us sufficient time for dinner. So, occasionally, some mischievous students would bring their unfinished dinner inside the church and continue eating! The rest of us would laugh, especially as the eating was done while we would be saying the 'Our Father' prayer at the point of 'Give us this day our daily bread.'

One day, without our knowledge, the principal slipped in and knelt behind us in the church. As usual, one student stood in front of the congregation and began playing his pranks. However, to our shock, the principal came from behind and simply walked past the erring student without saying a word. We were silent and feared for the worst. But to our surprise, he never ever raised the matter and no student was punished. That was also the end of our pranks!

The students misbehaved in the church because they did not see any authority figure there that could punish them for their tricks. However, the moment they realized that their principal could sneak in on them again, and might not spare them a second time, they began to behave properly in that church. But how would they have felt to know that, before their principal caught them, God was there all the time?

In this week's study, we are told that God is in His holy temple and all the earth must keep silent before Him [Hab. 2: 20]. How do you conduct yourself in your place of worship? What should be regarded as proper conduct in the presence of the Lord? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in this week's study.

1. Background: God is in His holy temple

You will recall from last week's study [Faith Watching) questions that prophet Habakkuk asked God concerning his prayer petitions for the southern kingdom of Judah. The first question wondered for how long he needed to continue praying and fasting without God's response. Instead of the expected answer, God told him that He was going to use the Chaldeans as the battle axe to war against and destroy the unrepentant people of Judah. Perplexed, the prophet asked why God would use wicked people to punish the wicked [**Hab. 1: 1-17**]. It was at that stage that God revealed to the prophet a number of staggering spiritual truths The first that we treated last week was, "The just shall live by his faith" [**Hab. 2: 4**]. For today, we shall study another important revelation, namely, "The Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him" [**v. 20**].

The message was not just for the people of Judah alone but for "all the earth," that is, for all humans on earth. It is a serious message, particularly when emphasis in modern worship tends to be shifting more to "user-friendly" than "God-fearing" practices. If God says that we should keep silent before Him, that is, reverence His presence, what constitutes proper conduct in God's holy temple? Before answering that question, we need to be convinced that we even accept God's word that He is in His temple. How can we know that God is in His holy temple?

2. How do we know that God is in His holy temple?

For purposes of this week's study, we shall use temple to refer only to a specific place or building which we call our church. Whether it is a rented room in a hotel or public building or an edifice in the prestigious part of town, it is a place where believers gather on their service days to worship God. We can know if such places can be regarded as God's holy temple by one or most of the following criteria:

a) *By faith*

We can take it by faith because God has said so. For example, Jesus has told us that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there in their midst [**Matt. 18: 20**]. He also told Peter that it was on his rock (of faith) that He would build His church [**Matt. 16: 18-19**]. After Solomon had dedicated the temple that he had built, God appeared to him at night and said, "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice. ... I have chosen and sanctified this house, that My name may be there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually" [**2 Chron. 7: 12, 16**]. Therefore, if you believe the word of God that He is in His holy temple, it will certainly affect how you behave in your place of worship. The Psalmist says, "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His

temple” [Ps. 27: 4]. David made that prayer when the house of the Lord was just a small place erected in Jerusalem to house the Ark of God [2 Sam. 6: 17].

b) *By Shekinah experience*

The glory and presence of God may be manifested in a designated place of worship during service. That is called the Shekinah experience. For example, during the dedication of the temple that Solomon had built and soon after the king had finished praying, “fire came down from heaven ...and the glory of the Lord filled the temple, and the priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord had filled the Lord’s house (and the priests and all the children of Israel) bowed their faces to the ground on the pavement, and worshipped and praised the Lord, saying, ‘For He is good, for His mercy endures forever’” [2 Chron. 7: 1-3]. Clearly, no one needs to tell you that God is there in His holy temple.

c) *By signs and wonders*

During worship and revival services, we may see signs and wonders confirming the promise of Jesus to believers [Mk 16: 17-18]. For example, while Paul was preaching one Sunday in Troas (Greece), a young man sitting by a window was sinking into a deep sleep when he fell down three storeys (stories in US English) and died. Paul rushed to him and prayed over him, and his life returned [Acts 20: 7-12]. Do you need any further conviction that God was there that day in His holy temple?

In deed, the temple of God plays several roles which only the Spirit of God can make possible. For example,¹ the house of God is, among others:

- A medical centre for “the blind and the lame came to {Jesus} in the temple, and He healed them” [Matt. 21: 14]. James wrote, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up” [Jam. 5: 14, 15].;
- A sanctuary for the house of the Lord “shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” and the Lord that gathered “the outcasts of Israel” will gather others [Is. 56: 7, 8]. It was to the temple in Jerusalem that king Jehoshaphat and his people fled when they were threatened on all sides by enemy forces. There and then, God spoke through a prophet to assure him that the battle was the Lord’s [2 Chron. 20: 1-15]; and

¹ ‘So Your Sunday Service Is Too Long?’ *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 5, No. 11: 25 Apr. 2004, pp. 2-3; www.bibleresourcecentre.com

- A training centre- where, for example, young Samuel was raised and nurtured into one of the most successful prophets and judges of ancient Israel [**1 Sam. 1: 7; 24-28**]

The Psalmist says, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord’” [**Ps. 122: 1**]. Clearly, God is in His holy temple and we need to keep silent and reverence Him when we are there.

3. Proper conduct in God’s temple

There is a time to speak and a time to keep silent [**Ecc. 3: 7**]. To keep silent in God’s presence does not necessarily mean that we should not speak. Otherwise, how can we pray to Him or sing His praises during worship in His holy temple? To keep silent, as used in today’s study refers to proper conduct in God’s house. But what constitutes proper conduct?

We go to different churches with different rules on what constitutes proper conduct. In some churches, you must close your eyes to pray while they keep them open in others. You wear shoes to enter some while you must be bare-footed in some others. Women cover their heads in some while they leave them bare in others. You kneel to pray in some while you sit or stand in others. You worship on Saturdays in some and on Sundays in others. Each of such places of Christian worship has its prescribed rules of proper conduct. However, since God does not see as we see, in that He looks at the heart and not appearance [**1 Sam. 16: 7**], *proper conduct has to be seen from God’s perspective.*

In general, you may attend a church which is more *user-friendly* than *God-fearing*. A user-friendly church is *more likely* to do what is expedient, such as, for example, modifying the interpretation of God’s word to suit shifting modern values and fads that appeal to younger (and affluent) worshippers. A God-fearing church, on the other hand, is more likely to emphasize obedience, repentance and salvation with earthly blessings seen as reward for putting God first in all things [**Matt. 6: 33**]. Nevertheless, God can still operate in both types of churches and apply different strokes to different folks. For example, it was in the house of the Lord at Shiloh where Eli the priest’s two sons slept with women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting [**1 Sam. 2: 22**] that young ‘Samuel grew in stature, and in favour both with the Lord and men’ [**v. 26**]. While God punished the unrepentant sons of the priest by allowing them to be killed in battle [**v. 34**], He established Samuel as a prophet recognized and respected throughout all Israel [**1 Sam. 3: 20-21**]. *Therefore, irrespective of where you currently worship, God will measure your conduct by the extent to which you are yourself God-fearing or self-promoting.*

I believe that you go to church because you believe that God is there and that He will hear your prayers and supplications. However, you may still need to evaluate your conduct so that you can take the best spiritual advantage of God’s presence

there. The starting point is to assess yourself. Charity, they say, begins at home. Before you start blaming your church, ministers or fellow worshippers for the spiritual state of the congregation, you should begin with yourself. Are you really there for God or for yourself? If you are there to promote yourself or your personal interests, your conduct will be different from that of those who are there to worship God. For example, you may be an attention-whore! You must be the centre of attraction. If you are not, then you are a victim who has a grudge against everyone else! Alternatively, a self-promoting worshipper may choose to be indifferent to practices that contradict the word of God where they worship as long as their own interests continue to be served. For example, that church may be where your boss or major customer or professional colleagues worship and as long as they keep rewarding you with better pay, promotion, contracts or social approval, that is the place for you!

On the other hand, you may be God-fearing and all you want is a church where you can reach God seated on His throne in His holy temple. However, since there is hardly a 'clean' church without any blemish, you have challenges to deal with. For example, you may find yourself in a church that is more user-friendly than God-fearing, and yet you may not be able to leave there and go elsewhere without starting your own congregation. Jesus was dissatisfied with the church leaders of His day but He never stopped worshipping with them in the synagogues.

Given the above scenarios, you can develop proper conduct in God's house by doing either of the following where appropriate:

a) *Get out of there!*

You may find yourself in a user-friendly congregation that is not amenable to bible-based spiritual reforms. For example, a church pastored by a gay bishop, a majority of whose members are gay, will hardly listen to you if you are straight and God-fearing. The best thing for you is to get out. When the Jews at Corinth opposed Paul's teachings about Jesus as the Christ, he shook his garment and said to them, "From now on I will go to the Gentiles." That night, the Lord appeared to Paul in a vision to assure him that he was on the right track and that he should not be afraid [Acts 18: 1-11]. Paul became the apostle to the Gentiles.

b) *Or curb your enthusiasm!*

You may find yourself in a God-fearing church but you have the tendency to be self-promoting. For example, rather than learn humility and service, you contend for leadership or influential positions even when you are required to take time to grow or be trained, or let those duly appointed or anointed for such positions to do their work.

Take the case of the church at Samaria where there was a man named Simon who had been a sorcerer. He had so astonished the people of Samaria with his magical powers that they regarded him as “the great power of God.” However, he gave his life to Christ after he had seen the miracles of God by the hand of Philip, one of the seven deacons anointed by the apostles [Acts 8: 4-13]. Soon after, Peter and John came to the Samaritan church to lay hands on the newly baptized converts so that they could receive the Holy Spirit. When Simon the sorcerer saw that by laying of hands, people received the Holy Spirit, he offered money to Peter, saying, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Peter cursed him for daring to think that the gifts of the Holy Spirit could be bought [vv. 14-24]. The former sorcerer did not conduct himself properly in the presence of God in His holy temple because he was self-promoting. So, if you find yourself running after bigger garments and higher seats in your church for which you are not spiritually qualified to handle, you are not God-fearing and you are not curbing your enthusiasm in the presence of the Lord.

4. Conclusion: silence is golden!

.Silence is golden because in the multitude of words, sin is not lacking [Prov. 10:19]. Figuratively, silence illustrates our respect for God’s presence in our place of worship. It is a mark of humility and a good training in patience. God is Spirit and those who worship Him must do so in spirit and in truth [Jn 4: 24].

So, next time you go to your church, do not wait for the orderlies to tell you what is right to do. Do not wear distractive outfits. Switch off your cell phone. Stop disturbing or distracting worshipers on your right and left. Remember, you came to speak with God, not with man. If you honour Him, He will honour you. If you despise Him, you will lightly be esteemed [1 Sam. 2: 30].

God is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.

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