**To Meet with God**

I have been privileged to attend many graduation ceremonies. I’m not big on formal events but graduation is different for me. It represents the culmination of hours and years of hard work and study.

I didn’t always take them seriously. When I got my Assoc. degree from Minnesota Bible College we were supposed to dress up. A friend and I each took an old white shirt, cut it off mid chest. Then we bought dress pants from Goodwill, cut the legs off at the calf and taped them on so it looked like we were dressed up. Actually we were wearing gym shorts.

Apparently the President of our college heard about it because when I got my Bachelor’s degree President Miller came up to me before the ceremony, unzipped my robe, looked me over and said I was OK to graduate.

Since then I’ve learned to appreciate the significance of graduation ceremonies. I love the sound of *Pomp and Circumstance*, the pageantry of the graduates marching in line, taking their seats and sitting down all together.

Of course I enjoyed LP High School graduation when Rachel and Bethany took their turns. Twice I watched with pride as Bethany and Levi got their degrees from IUPUI.

Seminary graduation was the first time I experienced the real solemnness that should accompany graduation. To march across the stage, the moderator reading the title of my thesis, then one of my professors placing the hood on me was a feeling hard to describe. (He was a short guy so I had to squat for him to get it over my head.)

My Doctoral graduation from Grace Theological Seminary was doubly fun because Rachel received her Bachelor’s degree from Grace College in the same ceremony.

At Grace they really emphasize the weightiness of the event.

         Anyone who didn’t attend the rehearsal would not be allowed to walk in the ceremony.

         All men were required to wear suit and tie – no exceptions.

         Families were not allowed to shout or cheer when their relative’s name was called.

         Everything was intended to enhance the magnitude of the occasion.

It culminated when my name was called and I walked across the platform as Dr. Gill read the title of my dissertation and once again a hood, emblematic of the institution and discipline, was place on me.

I like graduations because I’ve learned to respect and cherish the effort and time committed to earning each degree.

I was proud to witness Matthew Winter’s graduation from the Police Academy. I understand the commitment necessary to pass the academy. I was proud for him and his family to hear his name read, watch him pass before the viewers, knowing that I’m a part of his life.

When I attend a graduation now, I prepare for the event. I dress up. Not always suit and tie unless I’m the one graduating, but you won’t see me in blue jeans and a t-shirt. I’ll be quiet and listen attentively to every name read. I’ll applaud when the time is right.

**Here’s my point**: Graduation is important and in order to truly respect the event I prepare myself. Whereas I used to endure graduation, now I participate, even if it’s just as a viewer. Now I prepare myself so that I can get the most out of it and thus I enjoy graduation.

I got to thinking recently, I wonder if over time we have depreciated the significance of meeting with God because we often don’t prepare ourselves. I wonder if the importance of what it means to come into the sanctuary of the Almighty God is lessened by how we approach worship.

How do you prepare to meet with God? Don’t raise your hands, but…

         Do you take time to settle your mind from all your other activities before you come to church?

         Do you sometimes or often come rushing in, take a seat, and try to get into worship?

         Do you think about this as a special event? Because we meet every week it’s easy to forget that it’s a privilege.

         Do you think about how you present yourself before God?

         Do you do anything to prepare to worship, or do you just show up?

Listen. I’m not trying to be critical of anyone. I struggle with the same issues you do. Sometimes I rush from Worship Team rehearsal to Sunday school class to greeting people to leading singing and then try to focus on the Lord’s Supper and Ben’s sermon.

I think that maybe I’m missing something when I do that. It’s like I’m trying to fit God into my busyness instead of letting Him be the point of my being.

When I looked to the Bible for direction from God about how to prepare for worship, I came across something that really challenged me. I think sometimes I approach worship as part of my job instead of being an important meeting with the Creator.

Exodus 19 records Israel’s first meeting with God after escaping slavery. In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt…they came to the desert of Sinai.

God spoke to Moses to reiterate His covenant with Israel, that if they would obey Him and keep His covenant, they, of all the nations of the Earth, would be a holy nation to Him. (Exodus 19:1-6) God then told Moses that He was going to come and meet with them.

God’s instructions to Moses were this:

*The Lord said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.*

*Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, ‘Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on him. Whether man or animal, he shall not be permitted to live.’*

*Only when the ram’s horn sounds a long blast may they go up to the mountain.”* Exodus 19:10-13

Meeting with God was and is never a minor thing. It’s significant, solemn, weighty, and it should never be taken lightly. It should never be treated as just another day. To barge into the presence of God unprepared is an affront.

To prepare to meet with God they were required to consecrate themselves. Consecrate is qi-dash, to be pure, clean, or holy. They were to prepare themselves to be something other than common. It was such a significant event, God expected them to make themselves pure and clean and holy.

The word “*prepare*” used in verse 15 “ne-konim” carries the idea of a firm resolve to be ready for something important.

They were given two days to prepare to meet with God. They were told three specific things to do:

         wash themselves and their clothes;

         married couples were to abstain from having sex;

         set boundaries. The boundary in this case was that they must not touch the mountain.

I’m not suggesting that we’re bound by these conditions today. I suggest only that we see in these how serious God is about meeting together in His holy place. He expects us to prepare ourselves. He expects us to consecrate ourselves. We are not common people. We are the people of God!

I’m won’t ask couples if you abstain on Saturday night, but does anybody spend two days washing yourself and your clothes for worship? I agree that we can worship in any clothes, so could have Israel. But God told them to prepare even their clothes.

How much time do you spend clearing the world out of your head before worship?

From Monday through Friday we’re in the world with its vile disrespect for God and His ways. We’re constantly pelted with hate and vulgarity. The world is telling us: “*that which is good is bad and that which is bad is good*.” You can’t possible spend a week in that without your heart and mind being affected.

The world dulls the spirit and disorients the mind. And since many Christians aren’t involved in any kind of spiritual activity during the week, worship on Sunday morning is their only input from God. In that case resisting the world’s influence is like trying to hold back the wind.

That’s why God commanded, *Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy*. Exodus 20:8 The text tells us,

*For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.* Exodus 20:11

It wasn’t that God was tired. He was finished. He completed His creation and to moved into the His relationship with man. He established the Sabbath so that His people could have time to meet with Him; to focus on Him and His will following six days in the world.

When God came to Mount Sinai He spoke with thunder and lightning and the sound of trumpets. It was through this focused encounter that God delivered the Ten Commandments and established the standard by which He expects His people to live.

They could not have received God’s instructions if they had not prepared. Their hearts had to be ready. Their minds had to be cleared. Their wills had to be open. Then and only then could they hear what God said.

I wonder if we miss some of what God has to say to us if we haven’t prepared ourselves to meet with Him. If you walk away from church feeling like you didn’t get anything out of it, perhaps it’s because you didn’t prepare yourself.

God commanded Israel to prepare themselves so that they could receive His Word. Many years later John the Baptizer preached, *Prepare the way for the Lord*. God was about to send His final Word and He wanted people to prepare to receive Him.

Even the site of God’s meeting with His people was special. No one was to even touch the mountain until God arrived. What was it about Mount Sinai that God told them to set a boundary? It was a mountain, just like any other mountain, except that God would be present among them.

All week long this sanctuary is just like any other large room in any other building. But on Sunday it’s transformed into the meeting place with God. Maybe we need to be consider that this is more than just a room. This is where God comes to meet us.

So I ask you this morning, how do you prepare to meet with God?

         Do you do anything specific to get your heart and mind ready?

         Do you ever think about cleansing yourself of six days of the world’s influence?

         Do you think about the magnitude of the presence of God in this room?

When do you begin preparing yourself for worship? Does anybody think that you can party on Saturday until 1am Sunday morning and then come to church prepared to meet with God? May I suggest that we see Saturday as a day to get ready for the most important meeting we’ll have all week?

Before their meeting in Exodus 19 God told them to spend two days preparing. That was the first meeting. After this one time God commanded the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the seventh day but preparation began at sundown the day before. I think there’s something in that.

I think too often we depreciate the importance of this meeting when we control the day our way. We call it a family day by which we mean that meeting with God is secondary to the fun stuff we want to do as a family.

What Christian person would argue with family time? In this case Jesus would. He said,

*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.*Luke14:26

He wasn’t talking about abhorrence toward our families. He was talking about the cost of being a Jesus follower. He must come first, even before our families.

Do you suppose when they gathered at Mount Sinai to meet with God that some of the Israelites had gone camping or to a ball game or they were too tired because they returned to Egypt to attend a concert the night before?

And if they did do you suppose God would have said, *That’s OK. All that matters is that they confess my name*.

I think God would have told them to adjust the rest of their week to accommodate their family time and recreation and not sacrifice this most important meeting.

Can we really be surprised that our kids leave home and quit meeting with God when for years we’ve not made it our top priority, we’ve not prepared ourselves for worship as if it’s a significant, solemn, and weighty matter?

Can we really be surprised if we don’t get much out of church when we don’t prepare our minds by clearing out a week’s worth of the world so that we can hear from God? Remember, worship was God’s idea so that He could connect with and speak to His people.

Some suggestions. These aren’t Biblical. They’re my thoughts.

         Begin preparing yourself on Saturday.

         Be careful what activities tie up your mind on Saturday.

         Make a point of getting a good night’s rest.

         Do or read something devotional to set your mind on God.

         Think about how you will present yourself, not to people, but to God.

         Get up early enough so that you’re not rushed to get ready and to church on time.

         Pay attention to what’s going on, not on what you’re having for lunch.

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He made this interesting observation:

*We look and listen, but instead of receiving we react; instead of surrendering, we resist; instead of coming away changed, we come away critical. And that is true whether we come away from a movie we see on Saturday night or a sermon we hear on Sunday morning*.

It doesn’t have to be that way. If we will honestly prepare ourselves to meet with Almighty God, we will receive His Word; we will surrender to His will; we will come away changed by His Son.