Private Worship
Tasting and Seeing That the Lord is Good
By: Nicholas Kennicott

Religious worship is to be given to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to him alone; not to angels, saints, or any other creatures; and since the fall, not without a mediator, nor in the mediation of any other but Christ alone.

2nd London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, Article 22.2
Private Worship

"I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you."

Psalm 119:11

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

Isaiah 61:10

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

Philippians 4:4

"Beware in your prayers, above everything else, of limiting God, not only by unbelief, but by fancying that you know what He can do. Expect unexpected things, above all that we ask or think. Each time, before you Intercede, be quiet first, and worship God in His glory. Think of what He can do, and how He delights to hear the prayers of His redeemed people. Think of your place and privilege in Christ, and expect great things!"

Andrew Murray
A Personal Relationship With God

John Bunyan once wrote, "He who runs from God in the morning will scarcely find him the rest of the day" and, "Prayer will make a man cease from sin, or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer." This was true in the 1600s, and it is true today. One who lacks the discipline of daily private worship also lacks a close, experiential relationship with God. In Romans 8:29, the Apostle Paul wrote, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." Christians are being molded in Christlikeness, but not without a rigorous, disciplined effort in worship. Paul's exhortation to, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) is a call to faithfully persistent devotion to God in all that He has given to man to trust, love, and have communion with Him.

Private worship is the means by which man experiences a personal relationship with God. It is the fulfillment of the command to, "train (or discipline) yourself for godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7). Private worship, in the most simple definition, is the doing of spiritual disciplines. Donald Whitney writes, "[T]he only road to Christian maturity and godliness (a biblical term synonymous with Christlikeness and holiness) passes through the practice of the spiritual disciplines... godliness is the goal of the disciplines, and when we remember this, the spiritual disciplines become a delight instead of drudgery."¹

The spiritual disciplines previously referred to are things like Bible reading, study, prayer, and fasting, to name a few. While we must readily admit that worship is an ongoing, minute-by-minute reality in the Christian life (Romans 12:1), it must also be recognized that this worship is cultivated by times of intentional and focused use of the means of grace each day. This is precisely how one is "transformed by the renewal of [the] mind" (Romans 12:2), for " faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Genuine Christians will most certainly have a desire for daily private worship, but for most it doesn't typically result in action. Why? Is it time? Too many distractions? Not a thrilling enough experience? A sign of unbelief? Perhaps it's a combination of several of these elements. Most certainly, the human tendency toward unbelief, and a misinformed understanding of the sovereignty of God, leads the heart to conclude that private worship, while nice to do, is not all that important. Likewise, for many Christians the question is not, "Why should I do private worship?", but rather, "How do I do private worship?" Unbelief and misdirection is a combination that will kill worship before it even begins.

Why Should I Do Private Worship?
"The Spiritual disciplines are those personal and corporate disciplines that promote spiritual growth. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times."² Private worship is the track on which spiritual disciplines run. "True spirituality requires one to train at godliness in one’s walk with the Lord."³

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²Ibid., 17.
The purpose of private worship is to attain godliness. It is a striving to be Christlike and holy. God has revealed himself in two primary ways: Generally in nature, and specifically in Scripture. General revelation is God's work in creation that most certainly points to His existence as creator (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20). While the Apostle Paul makes clear that this revelation is enough for man to be condemned when he does not honor God in the way that He requires, it is by the grace of God that He has chosen to reveal himself to us otherwise in special revelation, namely through the Bible. Therefore, private worship is most importantly about understanding, recognizing, and rejoicing in God's nature, character, law, decrees, and conditions upon which mankind is redeemed. Wayne Grudem explains:

> It must be emphasized that Scripture nowhere indicates that people can know the gospel, or know the way of salvation, through... general revelation. They may know that God exists, that he is their Creator, that they owe him obedience, and that they have sinned against him. The existence of systems of sacrifice in primitive religions throughout history attests to the fact that these things can be clearly known by people apart from the Bible. The repeated occurrences of the “rain and fruitful seasons” mentioned in Acts 14:17 may even lead some people to reason that God is not only holy and righteous but also loving and forgiving. But how the holiness and justice of God can ever be reconciled with his willingness to forgive sins is a mystery that has never been solved by any religion apart from the Bible. Nor does the Bible give us any hope that it ever can be discovered apart from specific revelation from God. It is the great wonder of our redemption that God himself has provided the way of salvation by sending his own Son, who is both God and man, to be our representative and bear the penalty for our sins, thus combining the justice and love of God in one infinitely wise and amazingly gracious act. This fact, which seems commonplace to the Christian ear, should not lose its wonder for us: it could never have been conceived by man alone apart from God’s special, verbal revelation.  

Therefore, central to daily private worship is the reading, study, and meditation on the Word of God for the purpose of conceiving of and believing in who God is, and what He has and will continue to do.

As with all biblical paradoxes, it is important to acknowledge the both/and nature of private worship. Since private worship is for the purpose of godliness, man is responsible to take faithful action to cultivate a work that only God can do. In other words, godliness is both man's responsibility, and God's sovereign work. Man attains godliness through spiritual disciplines. God grants godliness as a divine gift of grace. This is God's continuous work in the lives of believers called sanctification (John 17:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 2:11). Christian believers must strive for godliness as if it were all of them that it is attained, and trust in the absolute sovereignty and goodness of God, knowing that the work is all of Him. Every man is responsible for his life and actions, but God will give the Christian new affections, desires, and longings that please Him.

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Private worship is invaluable for one who wants to truly know God. If a man is to fulfill the most important of all the commandments, to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37-38), he must first know not only the letter, but also the spirit of this command. This is found in Scripture. Likewise, the Bible teaches that, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9). If one does not engage in daily, private worship, this sick and deceitful heart will be his guide. Private worship is the means by which God does His work of sanctification in our lives. This is certainly not the only means, but it is a primary means:

Have you ever met someone who has a phenomenal knowledge of the Bible but has a distinct lack of grace in their life? They can reel off a string of verses they have memorised and can explain any biblical doctrine you ask them about, but the life doesn't seem to match up to it. The reason for this may be that the Word of God is in their head but not in their hearts. Moses told the Israelites that "the word is very near you: it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it" (Deuteronomy 30:14), and Jesus spoke about His Word abiding in us (John 15:7). [Private worship] provides the opportunity for the Word to penetrate our hearts and transform our lives.5

It must be mentioned that Bible reading and study is not the only aspect of private worship, but it is of utmost importance. Our ability to pray and sing and focus our hearts and minds on God is all informed by the words that God has inspired for our benefit. "No spiritual discipline is more important than the intake of God's Word. Nothing can substitute for it. There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture. .. if we would know God and be godly, we must know the Word of God -- intimately."6 The Bible is filled with the very words that Peter says, "Angels long to look" (1 Peter 1:12). "Isn't it tragic that where angels long to look we can't always be bothered to glance! Perhaps we have begun to take God's blessings for granted. If you come to your [private worship] feeling weary and wanting to get [it] over as quickly as possible, stop and think about the privilege that you have been given! You are able to meet with your creator, you are invited to encounter Almighty God, to hear from Him and worship Him. What better reason could there possibly be to set the necessary time aside?"7

How Do I Do Private Worship?

There is no one way in which a person must do private worship. One's personality, schedule, level of spiritual maturity, or station in life may all be determining factors in how private worship is done, to name a few things. The most important thing is that a person is doing private worship, no matter how that looks for them. Nevertheless, there are certain things that can be helpful to aid a Christian in their pursuit of godliness in private worship that have worked for many mature Christians throughout the ages. There is no one way to do private worship, but there are many helpful ways to do private worship. To follow are 10 principles to help you develop consistent and meaningful communion with God:

6Whitney, 28.
7Ibid., 23-24.
1. Plan
When entering into private worship each day, it is important to have a plan. Don't let the plan be something you come up with "on the fly" -- that's not a plan! Get it ready the night before, so you don't have distractions or more reasons as to why not to do it. Consider the following questions while planning:

- How much do I want to accomplish?
- Where's my Bible?
- What is my reading plan?
- What will I be praying for/about?
- Is there a book I need to have ready?
- Is the coffee timer set? Alarm clock?
- Am I going to bed on time so I'm not exhausted, thus sleeping through my time in the morning?

2. Place
Be as consistent as possible with the place in which you will be having private worship. Sit in the same chair, at the same table, and in the same room every time. This will help in the elimination of distractions and in the establishment of a habit. When picking out a place in your home for private worship, consider the following:

- Will I be disturbing others?
- Is it quiet here? Will others be disturbing me?
- Are there any temptations around (computer, chores, magazines, work, etc.)?

3. Time Period
When will you be doing your private worship? Set a time and stick to it as regularly as possible. Most importantly, don't let it be something that you squeeze in when you get some time because you'll never "get some time." Make it part of your daily routine, like brushing your teeth and taking a shower. Most people do those things the same time and in the same order from day to day -- why should private worship be any different? This should be daily, and as most godly, seasoned saints would suggest, it is best in the morning. Granted, some very faithful believers do their private worship in the evening, but if you have a family or an unpredictable work schedule, don't wait until the end of the day because it'll get left out more than you'd like. Start your day off right with the Lord and His Word.

- Psalm 88:13: "But I, O Lord, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you."
- Psalm 90:14: "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days."

4. Privacy
Remember, this is private worship. Family worship is important and necessary, but private worship is your personal time with the Lord. Private worship will be filled with times of prayer that bring tears of sorrow, and tears of joy. Other times you may want to sing, or pray out loud. These are intimate
moments with God, and will be some of the most memorable as well. Establish some privacy for the sake of your faith, growth, and joy in Christ, and encourage your family to do the same.

5. **Purpose**
Remind yourself each day of the need for growth in godliness. The heart will frequently be tempted to not spend the necessary time for profitable, private worship. Therefore, you need a constant reminder. You should seek to enter into private worship with a desire to have joy-filled communion with God, knowing that you will be blessed in each encounter with Him.

6. **Preparation**
There are several useful things that can be done to prepare the heart for worship. One way is to begin by praying from memory, I.O.U.S. (see sidebar) It is very helpful to get your heart and mind in focus.

Try beginning your Scripture reading in the Psalms and meditate on the words. Psalms have an uncanny way of calling the heart to worship. Utilize God's Word to help you rejoice in the glory of God.

It may also be helpful to utilize a prayer book like *The Valley of Vision* to prepare for private worship. Read and meditate on one prayer each day and allow the puritans to speak for you in marvelous ways!

7. **Perspective**
Make sure that you private worship is multi-perspectival. In other words, incorporate different elements into your worship that shall serve to draw you nearer to the Lord. Here are a few different elements you might want to try:

- **Bible** - This, as previously mentioned, is most important. Remember to have a plan. You will most likely stay on track when you have a systematic way of progressing throughout the year. Find a good 1 or 2 year through the Bible reading plan, and do your best to stick with it.
- **Prayer** - A vibrant prayer life is an eclectic prayer life. It is helpful to sometimes use lists or written prayers. Pray through passages in the Bible. Sometimes your prayer should be spontaneous, sometimes short, and sometimes long. It is also helpful to use resources that will help you remain mindful of the global work of Christ like *Voice of the Martyrs* or *Operation World*.

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9 [http://www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com)

• Journal - Something like the *ESV Journaling Bible* is useful in private worship, along with, perhaps, another journal for miscellaneous notes regarding your daily life, prayers, and what God may currently be working in your life. Journaling is helpful as you take the time to reflect.

• Song(s) - God doesn't care if you have a bad voice! The bible gives instruction to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making melody to the Lord with your heart (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

• Books - Books are helpful in private worship to get you to think more deeply on specific passages (commentaries), theological points, or various elements of Christian living.

8. Pleasure
Worship is for your joy, because joy that causes worship is joy in God. In the book *Desiring God*, John Piper writes, "worship is essentially a way of honoring God... worship is a way of gladly reflecting back to God the radiance of His worth... [but] it is necessary to define worship not simply as a way of reflecting back to God the radiance of His worth, but, more precisely, as a way of doing it gladly".¹¹ In all forms of worship, it is important to fight against the tendency to relegate it to a simple duty, and to pray that God would grant the deepest sense of delight. A fundamental aspect of private worship is the delighting of oneself in the Lord: "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). Fight for joy in God, that your worship may be complete.

9. Perseverance
Private worship is hard work. It is vitally important to press on through the difficulty as you fight for joy in Christ. There will be days that you wake up, not wanting to spend time in the Word of God and prayer. These are the times when it is most important to persevere, and do it anyway. The great discovery that is often made in times of perseverance is that the Lord is always faithful to reveal Himself to those who take to the battle against the flesh, and resolve to meet with Him. These are the blessings that cause one to press on.

10. Patience
Private worship is a rewarding discipline that takes time to develop. It is important to not get discouraged. There will be difficult days of which the Lord will use to build your faith and trust in Him. Pray for sustaining grace and remember that intimacy with the Lord does not function like a microwave. Sanctification is a lifelong process in which nothing happens overnight. Trust the Lord's timing and don't give up. "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him" (Psalm 37:7).

**Enduring to the End, For Your Joy**
Worship God and be filled with the deep satisfaction that He is lavishing upon you the greatest gift you will ever receive, namely Himself. Worship is for your joy, because rightly placed joy is the greatest means available to glorify God, thus achieving our chief end. Endure in private worship, and you will most assuredly experience a joy filled life.

There is a lovely story about a father and his newly converted son. "Dad I'm scared of something" said the young boy. "Tell me what it is son and we can pray about it together." "Well," he stammered, struggling to put his feelings into words, "I'm scared I might slip away from God." His father smiled, stretched out his hand, and told his son to put his hand inside, then he clenched it in a grip. "Try and pull away from me" he said. Try as he might, the young boy could not release himself from his father's grip. "My grip is stronger than yours," said the father, "and God's hold of you, is firmer than your hold of God!"

When we experience difficulties with our [private worship], we can persist in the confidence that God has a firmer hold on us than we have of Him. The Old Testament tells us that God loved us with "an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3). In the New Testament, Paul says "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8), and Jude tells us that our responsibility is to keep ourselves "in the love of God" (Jude 21). When the going gets tough, and the Christian life gets dry, we can encourage ourselves with the realisation [sic] that God loves us, and is more eager to meet with us than we are to meet with Him. What an incentive to set aside part of the day for the worship of God, for the reading of the Word of God and for fellowship with God!\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12}Robinson, 112-13.