

A Place for the Lord

by Chip Brogden

The sermon emphasizes the importance of preparing a place for the Lord where His needs are met through true worship and fellowship.

Scripture: Matthew 8:20, Matthew 18:20, Matthew 26:7, Luke 5:15, Luke 10:38, Luke 24:50, John 1:10, John 4:23, Revelation 3:20

Topics: "Spiritual Worship", "Jesus Centrality"

Description

Chip Brogden preaches about the importance of preparing a place for the Lord Jesus, emphasizing the need to welcome Him, hear His Word, give Him preeminence, recognize His worth, manifest Resurrection Life, celebrate Him, and have an ascendant spirit. He highlights how many gatherings fall short of meeting the Lord's Need, urging believers to be a place where the Lord finds satisfaction and heart-rest, focusing on spirit-and-truth worship and communion with Him.

Transcript

"Foxes have their dens, and birds have their nests; but the Son of Man has no where to lay His head (Matthew 8:20)."

How may we prepare a place for the Lord Jesus? What is He searching for? Where is the place of His rest?

Many of us have traveled "outside the camp" in search of something more in tune with God's own heart. I believe the most important calling we have is to prepare a place for the Lord Jesus, to give Him somewhere to lay His head. We will find that the purest, simplest expression of the Church is that which satisfies the Lord's heart and gives Him a place.

A LONELY JESUS WITHDRAWS

"News about Jesus spread fast, and crowds of people were coming to hear Him teach and to be healed of their sicknesses: but Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:15,16)."

Many of us share a remarkable testimony. I have spoken with several who can confirm my own experience. It is this: while sitting or standing within the church service many of us have had the sense that Jesus is quite lonely, in spite of all the praise, worship, and things which are done in His Name. I recently found a book published nearly twenty years ago in which the author claims to have experienced

the same feeling. It is as if Jesus is on the outside looking in. After much prayer we have come to understand that most of what is done in the name of "church" is not for the Lord at all, but it is for us.

Perhaps this explains why Jesus often withdrew Himself to a lonely place, and why perhaps He is withdrawing Himself from much of what is being done "in His Name". If someone asks why we do not participate more often in meetings or in gatherings, all we can say is that, most of the time, the Lord's Need is not being met in those places.

Jesus often withdrew to a lonely place. More and more, we are finding Christians in these "lonely places" who are praying, waiting, and wondering. I believe this is the first step towards finding a place for the Lord - sensing the Lord's Need for such a place.

"The time is coming - in fact, the time is now - when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. They are the kind of worshippers the Father is looking for (John 4:23)."

If there are true worshippers, then there are false worshippers. If there is spirit and truth worship, then there is a kind of worship which is unspiritual and false.

We will not dwell on what is false, for we are already too familiar with it.

The question before us is: how may we prepare a place for the Lord Jesus? What is He searching for? Here we have some insight into what the Father is looking for, and since the Son is the express image of the Father, we know they are both looking for the same thing. Are we that kind of place? Is the Lord at home with us? Has the Lord found what He is looking for in us?

(Not in a legal sense because we are His children and He loves us no matter what we do, but in a relational sense, in a fellowship and communion sense.)

These questions are irrelevant to those who are only concerned with their own needs. Church, God, the Universe, everything revolves around them and their needs. All decisions are made respective to their own needs, wants, desires (real or imagined). No thought is ever made to meeting the Lord's Need, seeing that His desire is met, making sure He has found spirit-and-truth satisfaction in us. That is why I say most meetings and gatherings do not meet the Lord's Need. How can they? They are seeking to meet man's need.

The object of this message is to provoke and challenge us towards a higher end, that the Lord may find a Place in us where His Need is met, and our needs are forgotten.

IN SEARCH OF A PLACE TO REST

"He was in the world, but even though He made the world, the world did not know Him. He came to His own people, and they would not receive Him. But the ones who did receive Him also received the power to become sons of God, yes, everyone who believed on His Name (John 1:10-12)."

The world did not know Him, and His own people would not receive Him. This, in spite of that fact that He is the Heir of All Things, and apart from Him no one and no thing was made. We see it in the synagogue, when one moment they are wondering at the gracious things that He said and marveling at His teaching - but by the end of the message they are trying to throw Him over a cliff. There are many such examples.

It is important for us to understand that, for the most part, the Lord Jesus is shut out and rejected from His own creation (in many ways, He is shut out from His own Church). It is not an issue of Lordship or Deity, for He remains King of Kings. The issue is always fellowship and communion. For the most part, according to the Scriptures, Jesus Christ lacks the intimate relationship He desires with His people.

Yet, there is a remnant of people who DID receive Him, and they received power! What about them? This is what we want to know: how may we prepare a place for the Lord, where He finds satisfaction and heart-rest, in the midst of a crooked and perverted generation, in the middle of so much darkness?

IN SEARCH OF SPIRIT AND TRUTH

The Lord is seeking spirit-and-truth-worshippers to commune with. In your group, in your meeting, in your heart of hearts - has He found what He seeks?

"Look! I am standing at the door, knocking! If anyone can hear Me, open the door! I will come in to you, and we will have fellowship with one another (Revelation 3:20)."

We have often quoted this verse in the context of salvation, but it should be noted that Jesus spoke these words, not to lost sinners, but to the Church of Laodicea. Even with His own people He does not force the door open, but He patiently knocks, and waits.

Before we can prepare a place for the Lord as a Body of believers, He must have ready and frequent access to us as individual disciples. In Laodicea the situation is so bad that the Lord makes His appeal to the individual heart to take Him in. We are in much the same condition today. The issue is not salvation, but fellowship and communion.

Indeed, the corporate Life of God's people will only rise as high as the individuals represented. That is to say, if there is no spirit-and-truth worship in our prayer closet at home, we cannot expect spirit-and-truth worship when we gather together. So often we come to a gathering expecting to "enter in" to a place in God. Instead, the gathering of believers should be the celebration and continuation of Who we have already entered into.

The worship, the adoration, the laying down of self, the ministry to the Lord, must be on the basis of the individual "Marys" who sit at His feet every day to hear Him, and the individual "Annas" who never leave the Temple, but minister to the Lord with fasting and prayers day and night. As we continue to ponder these things, may the Lord find an open door to our hearts.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you. How often I have longed to gather your children together under my wing, as a hen gathers her chicks, but you would not allow it. Now your house will be empty. You will not see Me again until you say, "Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord (Matthew 23:37-39)."

Some ask how the Lord Jesus can feel any sense of loneliness or loss when He has so many children already. The answer is quite apparent. If you have three, or five, or even ten children, would you not grieve over the loss of one? How much more does the Heavenly Father long for all of His children! The Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in search of the one. Such is the heart of Christ.

Now Jerusalem represents that which initially gave the Lord satisfaction, but no longer. It continues in the tradition and ceremony, in the outward things, yet it does not recognize Who the Lord Jesus is. The place

of His rest used to be the Temple, but even it has become a "den of thieves".

He longs to have them, to gather them under the shadow of His wing: but they would not allow it.

There is a place where the Lord is received: but it is outside of Jerusalem, away from the religious establishment, away from the scribes and teachers of Law, away from the Pharisees, Sadducees, theologians, Bible scholars and hypocrites, even away from the Temple in all its splendor.

Just east of Jerusalem, in a little village, in a single house, He finally finds what He has longed for.

BETHANY TYPICAL OF A PLACE FOR THE LORD

"Jesus and His disciples entered into a village, and a woman named Martha opened her home to Him (Luke 10:38)."

We know from the context of other Scriptures that this village is Bethany, which means "House of Figs". Bethany is the place where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus reside.

You'll remember that Jesus visited the Temple in Jerusalem, drove out the money-changers, and spent the night in Bethany. At some point He became hungry, and went to a fig tree expecting to find figs, but found nothing but leaves. So He cursed the fig tree, and it withered.

The fig tree represents "Jerusalem". Again, the Lord's Need is not satisfied, and this situation with the fig tree is meant to convey a spiritual truth. The Lord is "hungry" if you will, searching for something that resembles fruit, something pertaining to Life, but finding nothing but leaves - an outward show of greenery, but nothing of any substance or sustenance. But in Bethany, the House of Figs, He will find fruit.

In discussing how we may prepare a place for the Lord, we will take Bethany to be symbolic of that which satisfies the Lord's heart and meets His Need. We are not making a case for "house churches" or making a case against "institutional churches". We are hoping to impress upon you that what satisfies the Lord and meets His Need has very little to do with the outward appearance or geographical location. What makes a "Bethany" is not how they "do" church or how they meet (leaves) but Life (fruit).

There are seven characteristics of "Bethany", and we will look at each of them accordingly.

1 - The Lord is welcomed and received.

"Jesus and His disciples entered into a village, and a woman named Martha opened her home to Him (Luke 10:38)."

The Scriptures mention or indirectly reference Bethany seven times. We are still in Luke 10:38 because everything we have discussed so far leads us to the first characteristic of a "Bethany", a fruitful house, a place for the Lord. First and foremost, Bethany is the place where the Lord is received.

We have seen how the Lord is largely shut out and rejected by most of the world, even standing at the door and knocking to gain entrance into the Laodicean church. Not so with Bethany. Here the Lord gains the entrance that He has been long searching for. As such, He gains a Testimony in the earth, a golden lampstand from which His Light may permeate darkness. That is why the Churches of Revelation are typified as lampstands.

I believe this "receiving the Lord" is a definite thing, an intentional thing (and I'm not talking about "receiving the Lord as your personal Savior"). We have heard people say they hope the Lord "shows up" at their meeting or service. What kind of an invitation is that? "Lord Jesus, we welcome You, we receive You: not as a spectator, but as the honored Guest." Now that is an invitation to fellowship. Where two or three are gathered together in His Name, He is there. It is not so much trying to get Him to "show up" as it is acknowledging, welcoming, and receiving Him as in the midst already. But He must be recognized, and our "home" must be opened to receive Him. Is there not some preparation involved?

Some who seek "the Presence of God" often covet some feeling in their emotion. We are not after "the Presence" or some powerful encounter: we are after HIM, and if we are used to seeking some kind of feeling or experience then we must make the distinction between Christ and our feeling. That is not to say we should never feel anything; but whether we are emotionally or physically affected is beside the point. The true worship is spirit and truth, not flesh and blood. Hence, Bethany receives the Lord as His, for Who He is, to minister to Him and to meet His Need.

2 - The Lord's Word is heard while we sit at His feet.

"Martha had a sister named Mary, who sat at His feet and kept on listening to His Word (Luke 10:39)."

As we consider what it means to prepare a place for the Lord, a "Bethany", we come to the second characteristic of this place - it is where the Lord is able to speak, where hearts are open to hear and to perceive what He is saying and doing.

There are two elements here: she sat at His feet, and she heard His Word. We must sit at His feet and hear for ourselves. We can hear His Word through other vessels - the pastor, the teacher, the prophet, a devotional, a television program, a book. In spite of an abundance of vessels we are very dull in our hearing. We are well-versed in "the things of the Lord"; nevertheless we are quite shallow. Why? We have missed the Lord for ourselves. We have not sat down at His feet personally, we are consulting and conferring with flesh and blood, receiving second, third, or fourth-generational teaching. If this is our situation then we have no root in ourselves and we are apt to wither during the heat of the day.

You must sit at His feet and hear Him for yourself. Entering into the Lord's thought, becoming acquainted with His Ways as well as His Word, takes the sort of love-devotion Mary demonstrates. The Greek here is continuous action: she "kept on listening". Martha listened too, but when she arose to prepare dinner, Mary remained. As we progress we will see that Mary has discovered spirit and truth, and from henceforth she is always at the feet of the Lord in one way or the other.

That is where it begins: the disciple sitting at the feet of the Teacher, lingering there well beyond what is usual and customary, hanging on His every word. So Bethany satisfies the Lord because that is where He is able to directly deposit Himself into listening hearts.

3 - Christ has the preeminence as the One Thing among many things.

"Martha, Martha. You are worried and troubled over many things: but only one thing is needed. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her (Luke 10:41,42)."

Now we come to the third characteristic of Bethany. The place we are preparing for the Lord's satisfaction will be a place where He has the preeminence, where everything else takes its place beneath Him. So Bethany stands for Christ having the preeminence.

We have written elsewhere concerning the One Thing which is needed. We will not repeat ourselves again, except to say that this One Thing relates to Christ filling all things as the Preeminent One. If we see that God is working all things together according to this Purpose of summing up everything into Christ, towards the One Thing, then we will naturally seek those things which are conducive to this, and we will naturally shun those things which are not.

Later we see Martha continues serving, but everything is all right - there is no complaining about Mary, and everything seems to go on as it should. It is not that service, fellowship, or preparing meals is a bad thing: it simply has to be in the right order. It is not that we cannot perform many good works and spiritual duties: but the work of the Lord must never have preeminence over the Lord of the work. In our experience, most strife and discord between Christians is the result of becoming embroiled in the "many things" and forgetting that "only one thing is needed."

The solution? Paul said, "This one thing I do." We must be single-minded. As we seek first the Kingdom of God then all the other things will find their proper place beneath Him. Bethany continually speaks of the One Thing, and in the midst of much distraction and turmoil, it reminds us to take our place at the Lord's feet and keep first things first.

4 - The exceeding preciousness and worth of the Lord Jesus is recognized.

"As Jesus was reclining at the table, a woman came to Him with a jar of expensive perfume and poured it on His head (Matthew 26:7)."

We come to the fourth characteristic of Bethany, that is, the place where the Lord's Need is met, where His heart-satisfaction lies. Now we see that Bethany represents the recognition of the preciousness and the worth of the Lord Jesus.

This sounds like a very simple thing, but it gets right to the heart of the matter. The complaint from the disciples was that this perfume, worth more than a year's wages, could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Those who witnessed this event and protested were in essence saying, "He's not worth it." They viewed such pouring out as a waste.

"Unto you who believe He is precious (I Peter 2:7)." To those who appreciate the exceeding preciousness of the Lord nothing is too much for Him. Nothing poured out upon Him is a waste. Whether He is anointed with tears, or with perfume - He is worthy of all. Now when Christ is revealed to us and we begin to grow up into Him, our hearts are illuminated and we begin to grasp something of the preciousness of the Lord. The natural response is spirit-and-truth worship. This cannot be achieved with better music or dynamic worship leaders. Apart from revelation, apart from seeing, we cannot value Him in any deep sense. Worship is our response to revelation.

We want to appear to be busy doing for God, busy at our "ministry". But there is a place where we simply "waste" ourselves on Him, and outwardly we appear to be doing nothing. Would that more believers would "waste" themselves more often, ministering to the Lord, sitting at His feet, hearing His word, ministering to Him in secret prayer and fasting! Then when they do rise up to work, how much more fruitful they will be!

5 - Resurrection Life is manifest as we are decreased and He is increased.

The fifth characteristic of Bethany is its manifestation of Resurrection Life. Most Christians want the Life of the Lord in abundance like Lazarus, but they are not willing to lie dead in the grave until they stink. In other

words, they are not willing to accept the death of self that they may have the Lord's Life. They do not mind if the Lord is increased, but they themselves do not want to be decreased. Notwithstanding, Resurrection Life is not the avoidance of death, it is passing through death in order to overcome it. The one who loses his life will find his True Life, and the one who grasps his life will lose it. Lazarus cannot experience resurrection until he experiences death.

When the Lord finds a place for Himself, a "Bethany" of believers gathered together, His own Life will be there as well. Just as we cannot have the Life without having the Law of that Life, so we cannot have the Lord without having the Life of the Lord. And, just as surely as we experience His Life working in us through the Spirit, we will experience His Death working in us through the Cross.

It is not too difficult to find a meeting or a service in which you get a sense of death, not of Life. The music, preaching, and fellowship may be well and good: but you come away hungry and deflated because the Lord's Need is not met. The measure of the presence of the Lord or the blessing of the Lord upon a meeting, a work, or a people is always the Life. Let us not judge by outward appearances. Remember that it is not the leaves of the fig tree, but the figs, which contain the Life. The fruit of the Spirit is the outward manifestation of the inward Life.

Resurrection Life is that which has died, but now lives. It has the mark of the Cross upon it. It has passed through death once, and death can no more touch it. If we have not already passed through death then we are constantly fearful of dying, but the one who has already died and lives again has nothing more to fear from death. As we are decreased through the daily carrying of our cross, Christ in us is increased, and the strength of His Life is matured through our weakness. Bethany comprises all these things.

6 - The Lord Himself is celebrated as we "waste" ourselves upon Him.

"A dinner was given in Bethany to honor Jesus (John 12:2a)."

In John chapter 12 all the people we have discussed thus far come together into one setting. Martha is still serving, but there is no friction as before, and we surmise that she has found the proper balance between being and doing. Lazarus reclines at the table with Jesus, and this speaks of the fellowship of resurrection. His very presence at the table with Jesus is a testimony of overcoming, is it not? And of course, Mary worships at the feet of the Lord.

The dinner is given to honor the Lord, to fellowship with Him, to meet His Need, to give Him the glory due His Name. It is a celebration of HIM. So the sixth characteristic of Bethany is it celebrates the Lord Himself. Whereas praise celebrates what the Lord has done, worship celebrates Who He is. Praise can sometimes become "me" and "I" oriented (the Lord saved ME, healed ME, set ME free, gave ME power, etc.) but worship can never be centered on anything but the Lord.

Keep in mind, of course, that in the midst of this outpouring of affection upon the Lord Jesus, Satan is right there to cause a distraction. Whenever someone decides to prepare a place for the Lord then you can be sure that it will not be an easy piece of ground to maintain. The flesh will try to intrude. Those who do not know any better will present a problem. They will enter the assembly of saints with their own expectation of how things ought to be, and will endeavor to make their opinion known. They have not seen the Lord, they have yet to appreciate the worth of the Lord Jesus, and will view such pouring out of ourselves as "waste".

We note that Jesus always defended His worshippers, they never had to defend themselves. But if we must suffer for something, I can think of few things better than being accused of "wasting" ourselves on the Lord. Bethany is hallowed ground because it represents one of the last places of real estate on the earth where all activity centers around Christ as All in All. This alone makes Bethany priceless.

7 - An ascendant spirit and a heavenly testimony is evident.

"Jesus led them out towards Bethany, lifted up His hands, and blessed them as He ascended up into heaven. The disciples worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem full of joy (Luke 24:50-52)."

The seventh and final characteristic we note from the Scriptures concerning Bethany is that it represents an ascendancy between earth and heaven, between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God. Bethany is where "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" is fulfilled as a precursor to its ultimate fulfillment in all the earth.

The Church is primarily heavenly. "He has raised us up together and made us sit together with Him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6)." We are not suggesting that the Church does not exist at all on the earth; but we maintain that the Church is heavenly, not earthly. Though it is on the earth, it is not of the earth. Though it is in the world, it is not of the world. Much is made of us going to heaven when we die, but the goal is not so much to get the earthly into the heavenly as it is to get the heavenly into the earthly, and by extension, to maintain the Testimony of Jesus as something over and against this present darkness. Bethany provides the ground upon which the heavenly is made to bear upon the earthly.

Bethany has a heavenly savor. There is an ascendant spirit there which lifts us up to the heavenlies. If there is a failure in the Church today it is this: we live as natural, earth-bound, flesh-and-blood people who speak great things but do not live what we speak. There is no heavenly distinctiveness about us, little reality about us which suggests this other-worldliness of which we claim. We live as "mere men", religious men, even spiritual men, but not as citizens of heaven.

Nevertheless, I believe that as we prepare a place for the Lord this ascendant spirit will break forth upon us spontaneously. It is one thing for us to try to act heavenly, and it is quite another thing for us to enter into such communion and fellowship with the Heavenly Man that we simply begin to exude His heavenliness, as the priest in the Holy Place exuded the fragrance of the sweet incense. The Kingdom of Heaven is where Christ has the preeminence and fills all things: and if this is the case with us individually, or corporately, then it can be said of us that the Kingdom of Heaven has arrived.

PREPARE A PLACE FOR THE LORD

"Wherever two or three are gathered together in My Name, there I am in the midst of them (Matthew 18:20)."

When we take everything the Scriptures say relating to Bethany we have an idea of what it means to prepare a place for the Lord. To summarize, Bethany is the place where:

- The Lord is welcomed and received;
- The Word of the Lord is heard while we sit at His feet;
- Christ has the preeminence as the One Thing among many things;

- The exceeding preciousness and worth of the Lord Jesus is recognized;
- Resurrection Life is manifest as we are decreased and He is increased;
- The Lord Himself is celebrated as we "waste" ourselves upon Him;
- An ascendant spirit and a heavenly testimony is evident.

Perhaps you are saying, "Oh, that I could find a place where believers gather together towards this end! How I wish I could find such fellowship! I am out here in the desert with no place to go." Brother or sister, my challenge to you is this: stop looking for such a place, and be such a place.

Perhaps you are in a lonely place because the Lord desires to use you to establish a place in the wilderness for Him. If the Lord has impressed His Need for such a place on your heart, then declare your heart a "Bethany" place and take this up between yourself and the Lord. Give the Lord some ground to build upon. Give Him His place. Do not look for multitudes of people. It is better to have one, two, or three gathered together as the Lord's Bethany than to have hundreds or thousands of people gathered together as something other than Bethany.

Is there anyone in all the world who can truly meet for the purpose of ministering to the Lord and "waste" themselves in worship, giving no thought to their own need, but laying down their lives wholly for the Lord's satisfaction? I pray something is stirring within someone to seriously consider this before the Lord. Many are called, but few are chosen. May He quicken this word to our hearts, and whosoever will, let them hear.

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