

Manifest Presence - Part 6

by Richard Owen Roberts

The sermon emphasizes the necessity of drawing near to God through humility, repentance, and extraordinary prayer to experience His manifest presence.

Duration: 31:08

Scripture: Malachi 3:6, James 4:1-4, James 4:6-9

Topics: "Gods Presence", "Spiritual Conflict"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a powerful incident that occurred during a conference in a small church in Colorado. The pastor took the speaker and another gentleman on a drive into the mountains, which turned out to be more than just a drive. The sermon then focuses on a passage from the book of James, discussing the source of quarrels and conflicts among individuals. The speaker emphasizes the importance of drawing near to God and highlights the ineffectiveness of the church when God is not present in its actions.

Transcript

When we started on this theme of the manifest presence of God, I asked you to consider with me a passage out of James, and I want to return to that passage this morning for these closing remarks. This is the fourth chapter of the book of James. What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasure that wages war in your members? You lust and you do not have, so you commit murder, and you are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

You do not have because you do not ask, you ask and you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your own pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose? He jealously desires the Spirit, which he has made to dwell in us, but he gives a greater grace.

Therefore, it says God is opposed to the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep.

Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and he will exalt you. Now, the verse that I used when we commenced this series was verse 8, draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

At that time, I suggested that it's crystal clear from a verse like that, that God is not always as near as it is desirable for him to be, and in fact, as we really need him to be. I am myself rather overwhelmed at the amount of material in the Bible on the subject of God's presence, but the strange thing to me is not that there is so much in the word on the subject, but that the subject is so little thought of and spoken of today. Now, I would like to focus merely on the first words, draw near to God, and as I have been saying to you, there is a responsibility that is private, and there is also a responsibility that is corporate, and I would like you to think of those words in both those dimensions, what you can do personally to draw near to God, and what ought to be done corporately by this choir, with, of course, the expectation that God, who does keep his word, will indeed draw near to us, and I have set before you the conviction that if this choir does truly draw near to God, and God draws near to this choir, some marvelously needed things will occur in the congregation.

Now, I begin this matter this morning by saying to you that the whole subject of drawing near to God and God drawing near to us is really, in our day, a matter of opinion. Some are of the conviction that God is already as near as he will ever be or has ever been. I am frequently encountering that viewpoint.

People hear me say something along the lines I've been speaking to you, and they look at me as if I were peculiar indeed, and they say, well, it's not any different than it ever was, which is a pitiful response. It may not be any different in your experience now than it used to be, but I can assure you that the church today is not where the church used to be. Things were radically different before than they are now.

Now, I have made a study of this, not boasting, but simply reporting a fact. I have accumulated thousands upon thousands of books dealing with this overall subject. Sometime you might want to visit the Graham Center Library, where almost all the books there were once mine, and a high percentage of them dealing with this whole matter of whether God is as near now as he was and what can be done to affect the presence of God.

And I say to you without any thought whatsoever that any person could contradict what I'm saying, God is not as near to us as he has been to our fathers. Now, the matter of nearness is, as I've said, the matter of opinion. Some of you have grown children.

I remember when I went off to college, it didn't seem as far to me, I'm convinced now, from my home to where I went to school that it did seem to my parents. I thought I was near enough at any time. Now, my parents lived in New York, and I went to college in the state of Washington.

I was near enough to suit me, but not near enough to suit them. Now, I view things a little differently now than I did then because our son, when he was ready to go to college, thought that California was near enough. And we see him from time to time, but it's crystal clear that in his mind he's living near enough to us.

But we don't feel that way. We feel he's not nearly close enough. Now, it is perfectly possible, in fact highly probable, that God's viewpoint of this matter of our nearness is radically different from our viewpoint.

We may feel ourselves to be near enough to God, but God may feel as if there is a far greater gap between himself and us than ought to be. So what I'm talking about is not, do you think you are near enough to God, individually or corporately, but how does God think? After all, the great task of believers on every subject is to agree with God. The essence of genuine Christianity is to be in agreement with God.

What it means to have faith is not that you have some intellectual conviction of some fact being true. To have faith means you live in agreement with God. And on the subject of nearness, if God thinks I'm not near enough, then I need to enter into agreement with him, rather than holding out for what is satisfactory to me.

Now, certainly one means by which we come to an understanding of how God feels on this subject is the scripture itself. And there is plenty of scripture to indicate that God is not satisfied with our nearness to him. And he has exhorted us in a great variety of ways to alter this matter and to draw near.

And here is an exhortation in James 4, draw near to God. And I urge you personally to draw near to God. Let it become the great determination of your life.

What is more important for you than to draw near to God? And do I need to submit to you again that the reason the church is so ineffectual in the world, and if you think it's effectual, I wonder where your mind is at. The church is so ineffectual, it ought to make good people weep. The reason it is so ineffectual I have been submitting to you is because God is not in much of what we do.

He draws near to us, he makes it clear, when we draw near to him. Let that become the great object of your life, to be as near to God as is possible. But as I've urged already, take these matters this morning both personally and corporately.

What are you going to do to see that this choir draws near to God? Have you a plan formulated? Have you a determination as to what will be done to be assured that this choir will be as near to God as God himself desires? Now obviously if we're going to do this, if personally and corporately, we are going to draw near to God, then we must see that anything that might be in the way is eliminated. You can get very near if there are walls. Walls must of necessity be removed.

Private walls must come down, and corporate walls. You may have a bad attitude towards someone in this choir. It would be an unusual choir if there are not some mean things said, if there are not some who think ill of others.

You'll never get near to God if you entertain a mean spirit. There are no doubt some in the choir whose morals are loose. Some who are engaged in things that are offensive to God.

You'll never get near to God while you allow barriers of sin to exist. And not only are there barriers of sin, but there are things which the apostle described as weight. We are instructed to lay aside every sin and the weight.

You can get near to God if you are carrying with you great bundles of things that God has no use for. You must learn to strip yourself of that which has no part or place in the drawing near to God. But as I've suggested, it's both private and corporate.

No church is ever near to God that does not practice corporate repentance. Just as individuals sin, so bodies, groups, corporate bodies sin. Let me share with you an incident that I think is one of the most

stirring and affecting that I've ever known about.

On the order of three years ago, I was holding a series of special meetings in a small church in Colorado. It was actually a conference, a Keswick convention, sponsored by the church for the mountain states. But we were not very far into this convention when the pastor said to the other gentleman who was speaking, he happened to be a Welchman and myself, I'd like to take you on a drive up into the mountains.

Now I've learned through the years that often when pastors propose drives, they really have something other in mind than driving. And so it would be most unusual when I would say no, even if I wasn't interested in the drive, I would want to be sensitive to a need that needed to be expressed. So that was true in this case.

I said certainly when the pastor made this proposal, we had hardly gotten out of town before he said, I have a problem, I need to lay in front of you for your advice. And before I tell you what the problem is, I want to tell you that whatever you two men say in response is what the board of this church and myself have agreed to do. And we have formulated what we think to be the right solution.

If you men agree with us, that's what we're going to do. If you disagree, we've committed ourselves already not to do it. Now then here, he said, is the problem.

When I came to this church, he said, and he named the length of time, it hadn't been much before that, I found that there was a family in the church that were stirring up trouble. And I had only been here a few weeks before it was evident that they were trying to get rid of me. When I discussed the matter with the deacons, I found out they had gotten rid of my predecessor and they had gotten rid of the man before him.

I was the third one that they had gone to work on in a determination to eliminate. He said the deacons, this was a Baptist church where the deacon's role would be similar to an elder's role in our situation here. But he said the deacons were tired of the whole matter and they said to me, look this family has been making trouble for years, we need to get rid of them.

So he said we proceeded to call the congregation together to discipline this family and we actually excommunicated them. But he said following the excommunication, they went to court and filed a lawsuit. And the lawsuit was for all of the church property, the church bank account, the church role, everything.

And he said the judge was very pleased at the prospect of this suit and he said now we're in the midst of this. However, the deacons and myself have the conviction that it's not right for us to go to court. He said even though these people were wrong in their conduct, we believe that they're Christians and we don't think we ought to go to court.

So now this is what we've decided to do. And if you agree this is what we're going to do. We've decided as a congregation simply to march out and give them everything.

We have enough people who are ready to start from scratch. We're just going to give them the whole works. Do you agree? I said no, absolutely not.

What a wicked thing that would be. What? Why do you say that? I said will you follow my advice? Well, he said if we can. Well, I said then I advise you to call a solemn assembly.

I've never heard of that. No, I said most people haven't. But I advise you to do it.

Now I said tell me about this discipline. How did you feel when the people were out of the church? Oh, he said we were all relieved. Well, I said you've sinned greatly because the purpose of church discipline is not to relieve yourself of a problem.

The purpose of church discipline is to bring people to repentance who otherwise will not repent. Now you have sinned as the pastor, the deacons have sinned and the congregation have sinned in removing people out of wrong motives and you must repent. That is a corporate sin that requires corporate repentance.

Well, I haven't time to give you details but I spent quite a while with this pastor instructing him concerning the solemn assembly, the day of corporate fasting and prayer and corporate repentance. I said you erred greatly in haste in getting rid of this family. Now don't err in calling a solemn assembly hastily.

So some three months were between our conversation and the solemn assembly. In the meantime a second lawsuit was filed and I don't have the figure correct but I think it was for 15 million dollars damages for this family, a father, a son and two grown daughters who were all put out of the church. But this congregation did call a solemn assembly.

They met in a day of fasting and prayer and corporate repentance. They pled with these four people to come that were put out so that they could repent of the wrong way that they put them out. They didn't invite them to come so they could repent of putting them out but to the wrong motive in putting them out.

They did not come but now listen carefully, approximately two weeks after the solemn assembly God intervened. The four members of this family were all killed in the crash of a private airplane. The lawsuits ended and God drew very near that congregation.

Sounds like the book of Acts. God hasn't changed. Draw near to me says God and I will draw near to you.

This I'm saying is a private matter. I must draw near to God but it's a corporate matter. God will never draw near to the Wheaton Bible Church until the Wheaton Bible Church learns to obey scripture.

Now nobody can accuse us of putting people out of the church from wrong motives but God can accuse us of not loving people sufficiently to discipline them because we don't practice church discipline. Most churches don't. Now what kind of a God are we dealing with? A God who says well in your case I excuse it because after all you're an exception.

My rules, my laws, my regulations don't apply. Draw near to me that means eliminating barriers, pulling down any wall, going back and doing what we didn't do, making right the wrongs. I'm saying to you this matter of God's presence appears to me to be priority number one.

I can't conceive of anything more important than God drawing near. When I think about heaven the attraction of heaven is to me not gold streets. Honestly that leaves me cold.

A city whose foundation is on precious stones, well I'm not opposed to it but it doesn't do anything for me. Not even harps touch me or choirs. Not to speak ill of those but they don't move me.

But there is something about heaven that affects me very deeply and that is God is there. And my understanding of heaven is that those who are there will know the uninterrupted presence of God. Now that to me is highly desirable.

I can conceive of anything that approaches the desirability of being in God's presence. And it seems to me that that is the same here and now. What is more desirable than that God himself should draw near.

But he will not unless we draw near to him. But now I want to add this very positive matter. It requires cultivation.

I have suggested to you a distinction between the essential presence of God, the cultivated presence of God and the manifest presence of God. May I speak to you now just in these last moments concerning cultivating God's presence. And I want to make a couple of very definite suggestions to you as to what you can do.

What in fact I believe with all my heart you ought to do. Whether or not I draw near to God depends an awful lot upon how desirable I see this to be. Last week I suggested to you on the basis of the words of the Lord in Isaiah 57, thus saith the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy.

I dwell in a high and lofty place with him also that is broken and contrite to revive the heart of the broken, to revive the spirit of the contrite. I suggested to you on that basis that God does indeed dwell in a place high and lofty, that he is holy, that his name is holy, that he inhabits eternity, and that our sense of who God is ought powerfully to affect and will powerfully affect our sense of who we are. And the way one arrives at the brokenness, a contriteness, a humility is not by saying to themselves, well it's naughty to be proud and right to be humble, therefore I determine to be humble.

One does not arrive at humility by determination. If in fact you were to do so, if you could achieve any measure of humility by determination, you would then take pride in the humility you achieved. But when you have an awesome sense of God, the humility simply descends upon you.

Brokenness, contriteness simply comes with an awesome sense of God. Now here's a very practical suggestion I would urge you to deal with. There are dozens and dozens of passages in scripture where God makes some very important unfolding concerning himself.

I hope you don't read your Bible to accumulate facts. We ought to study our Bibles in order to draw near to God. Now here is a very practical way to do it.

Dozens of the passages of which I have just made mention utilize the word I. In fact, passages in which God himself is speaking. May I urge you to go through the entire Bible and to make note of every single passage in which the word I appears. God speaking about himself.

And to classify these in two directions. First, those passages in which God makes some revelation concerning who he is. And those passages that make some revelation concerning what he says or does.

And give the larger of the attention, which I'm emphasizing, to those passages in which God makes unfoldings concerning himself. For instance, these words, Malachi 3.6, I change not. And may I suggest to you, this could occupy your minds and hearts for a protracted season, may I suggest to you that you take words like that, I change not, and give some very solid time in meditation upon the significance of those words.

And one way to get the significance of words like that is through contrast. Who here would like to stand and say, I change not? Well, one way to appreciate what God says about himself is to come to grips with the vastness of the difference of that statement God makes and ourselves. I mean, everything about us is

in a state of change or flux.

Our hair, our skin, our memories, our wills. We say, I won't, but we do. I will, and we don't.

I'll never do that. And we think about it and realize what a dumb thing it was, and we go ahead and do it. Some are so stubborn they remain dumb rather than doing it, but we change, but God does not.

Take every passage of Scripture where God makes such a statement about himself and meditate deeply upon it until God becomes in your mind who he really is, until your view of God is so vastly swelled that you have an altogether new understanding of who you are. Passages such as you'll find in Isaiah 46, I will it, I bring it to pass, I do all my pleasure. Will you take that serious suggestion to heart? Then I want to make a statement about prayer.

Why not get serious about prayer? God is never going to draw near a prayerless people. It's inconceivable. Somehow we almost never these days use the word extraordinary with prayer, but we ought to use the word and we ought to practice extraordinary prayer.

We live in a desperate day. We live in a day when the nearness of God is so needed that the need is almost inexpressible. What about committing yourself to a level of prayer vastly beyond where you've ever been? Extraordinary prayer.

Hours of prayer instead of moments. So many professed Christians only pray on the run. They know nothing about closet prayer.

What about moving into the realm of becoming a man or a woman of prayer? And then take these suggestions I've just made corporately. What about helping one another in this matter of coming to grips with who God is? What if you were to encourage and counsel one another? What if every week you were to share with one another what God is teaching you about himself? What if you were to hold one another to a commitment to draw near to God? And what if instead of a few moments sincerely spent in prayer in connection with your choir practices and before you go out to sing, what if you were to give protracted seasons to prayer? Why not? If you don't, if you do not do something to assure the nearness of God to this congregation, you will be eternally responsible for your failure. Lord Jesus, we don't know much about your manifest presence.

This we honestly acknowledge. But I plead for this choir that it will do what it can and what it ought in drawing near to you. And will thou be pleased to so move and work that what has been felt by way of a tug upon the heart in these Sundays will become reality for this choir, for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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