

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

In less than a weeks' time the church doors will be opened for worship. Yes, we can be together again to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ together with the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. God the Father wishes all of His children to be together in worship. When we gather, we gather in the unity of the Holy Spirit who calls us to worship in spirit and in truth. We gather united in our belief in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We gather because of God, period.

During this time of the virus, specific decisions were made for our church with everyone's health and safety as the primary concern. Of course, there are various opinions on this. There are actually more opinions than there are people. Decisions may be made that you do not agree with and may not seem all that smart. Having said that, all the decisions that have been made by our council and committees have been made with the goal of preserving the health and vitality of our congregation. Each decision has been bathed in prayer and carefully thought out. You may not agree with all the decisions and that is totally okay. Please be thankful that at least we can come together and worship God even though it may not be done in the way you want it to be done. What is important is why we are here, and we are here because of the Lord Jesus Christ and all that He has done to save us for all eternity. This will be different until the pandemic has run its course. Only God knows how long that will be, and God is not telling us. We wish to offer worship services that are safe and will not compromise your health; that is the goal. Please come with a good attitude and with flexibility. Some things will be different but for good reason. It may not be what you want and that is totally okay. We are here to worship God, not to worship the forms and ways that we are so accustomed too. Sometimes our forms of worship can slide into idolatry. "I want it my way" or it is not worship. That may be called the sin of idolatry, worshipping the form and not God Himself. The forms of worship may be different for a time, but the God we worship never changes. He is the same yesterday, today,

and forevermore. God's perfect love draws us to worship Him. His Presence will greet you, sustain you, fill you, and speak to you. This will happen at all 4 services next weekend regardless of the forms of worship. God is the reason we worship. It is not about you and it is not about me; it is all about God. The forms of worship may change but God does not.

I wish to spend a couple of minutes speaking about two major things that hinder our worship when we gather together in the name of Christ. Pastor, are you saying that there is something in my life that could hinder our worship experience together? Pastor, how can you say that? In prayer I have had two inner promptings about hinderances in our corporate worship. The first one is this. Resisting the Holy Spirit was and is a clear message. The other day I was in conversation with family members and I received a phone call and text. While I was looking at my phone I completely zoned out and did not hear a word of the people speaking right in front of me. My attention was completely elsewhere. Now in all honesty, nothing life-changing was being said. The conversation was good and fun, but what I missed out by not listening did not alter my life. Church is completely different. There is something life-changing in every part of our worship from beginning to end. The Holy Spirit, who resides within every believer, brings each part of our service alive as we meet. The Holy Spirit personalizes every part of the service for you as you have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying.

At the beginning of the worship service we confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness. It's like taking a spiritual shower and God cleanses of our sins. It is at this time God cleans the wax out of your ears that keeps you from hearing what the Holy Spirit is saying. Sometimes you and I come to worship totally deaf. God could be shouting in your ears what He wants you to hear and you do not hear anything. My friend Bob Blessing is deaf in one ear because of the dirty bombs and explosions he experienced in Iraq. Some of us come to church totally deaf because we bombed out during the week or bombs when off around us that we had

no control over. We are so overwhelmed with life that our ears have become deaf to what God is saying.

So how do we get our ears cleaned so God can speak, and we can hear. I will save the most obvious answers for last.

1. Ask God to give you ears to hear. Only God can give to you or plant inside of your ears the hearing device that picks up what God is saying to you personally. God will not give to you His hearing aids unless you are willing to listen. I remember years ago having a hard time hearing. I went to the doctor and he took a bunch of built up wax out of my ears. I walked into the office not hearing all that well and I walked out of the office hearing things I had not heard in a long time, such as the ruffling of papers, the chirping of birds, and people whispering what they did not want me to hear. Please get the wax out of your ears. Ask God to do ear surgery and restore your hearing to pick up what God is saying to you.

2. Another way to begin hearing what God is saying to you is to take seriously what your Christian friend or friends are saying to you when they are being honest with you about yourself. Recently a member of this church told me something about one of my attitudes that needed to change, a sinful attitude. After the person spoke I felt so convicted by the Holy Spirit and knew the Spirit had been trying to get through to me, but I had deaf ears. Sometimes God can use a Christian friend to get the wax out of our ears so we can hear what God is saying. Of course, we are to speak the truth in love and not just say, "How can you be so deaf?"

3. Some of the most important truths of the Christian life have come to me through reading solid Christian books. It all started in the 7th grade when I read Corrie Ten Boom's book the Hiding Place 7 times. That book changed my life and still does. In confirmation, every student watches the movie the Hiding Place. God spoke so clearly to Betsy and Corrie. They both had ears to hear what God was saying to them. The Holy Spirit can take the words of the authors and somehow get through that wax build up. I believe we all should be have least one Christian

book going year-round to keep our ears open. I don't mean one year in one book but read one and then another and keep going.

4. Spend time alone with God in prayer and be silent before God. Yes, we talk to God in prayer but then we can remain silent before God and become aware of His Holy Presence within us and all around us. Being ever so quiet before God, waiting on the Lord, you may gain an inner prompting from the Holy Spirit giving you much-needed direction. Busyness can keep God's Word at bay. Are we too busy to listen to God?

5. Use a hymn book for your private devotions. They have a way of clearing your ears. The men and women who wrote the hymns had ears to hear what God was saying to them and they put it to music. Those words have blessed believers for centuries. When you learn those words and sing them frequently, at the end of your life they will still be there when you no longer recognize any human being. You still have the hymns feeding your soul. Those who wrote the hymns stayed faithful to God until the Lord took them home.

6. Listen to your spouse. If you are married to a Christian, your spouse more than any other person knows where you have a deaf ear to God. It may be hard to take, but please do it. Wives, please speak the truth in love and men, do the same. Words spoke out of anger are not heard and lead to early deafness in the spouse you are speaking to.

7. Of course in order to hear the Word of the Lord in worship, being in the Word of God all week long has a way of keeping your ears clean. In the Gospels Jesus says many times, "He who has ears let him hear." This verse is quoted 7 times in the book of Revelation. Obviously if God tells us we need to listen, that also infers there are times we do not listen.

Deaf ears during worship keeps out the blessing God's wishes you to experience. Deaf ears during worship is like being forced to listen to a person scratch their fingernails on an old chalk board. May the Lord open up all of our ears so that our faith will grow by what we hear.

Secondly what can hinder our worship is what I call personal irritabilities. Some of us are clinging to long-held grudges that may go back 20, 30, or more years or have arisen since we shut the church doors. I know that if I am holding a grudge against any of you, it completely stifles my freedom in the Holy Spirit, and you might sense it too. Refusing to forgive a person who has let you down, disappointed, or hurt you in any way plugs up the flow of fellowship between you and God. It is what I call spiritual constipation. When you sit there constipated, you put off an aroma that those around you can detect. You may not notice your own odor, but those who have noses around you may even find themselves holding their breath or moving.

I am asking all of us who have grudges against one another, personal irritabilities to do what Jesus asks you to do. **Luke 17:3-4(NLT)** ³So watch yourselves! “If another believer sins, rebuke that person; then if there is repentance, forgive. ⁴Even if that person wrongs you seven times a day and each time turns again and asks forgiveness, you must forgive.” Friends, it is good, right, and healthy for you to speak the truth in love and say, “When you said these words” or “when you did this,” I was deeply hurt. You help another person when you do this because many of us, including myself, can lack self-awareness. Some people have an ability to go around and offend everyone and no one loves them enough to call them on it. Speak the truth in love, quietly, calmly, prayerfully, and then the Lord has an opportunity to heal that relationship. In my office I often ask the question after the conversation, “Please tell me if I have offended you?”

I want to end in prayer asking God to flood us with His love so that we may love the Lord our God with our entire heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. Let us pray.