



*15 Seven days shalt thou keep a solemn feast unto the LORD thy God in the place which the LORD shall choose: because the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thine increase, and in all the works of thine hands, therefore thou shalt surely rejoice. 16 Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose; in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles: and they shall not appear before the LORD empty: 17 Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD thy God which he hath given thee. (Deuteronomy 16:15-17)*

When we consider the volume of a vessel, we usually think in terms of the material sense. The vessel is viewed as full, empty, half-full, etc., of some material substance such as water or wheat. But there is another vessel that is the concern of God – the heart vessel of every soul born to woman. Our hearts are either treasure chests of immeasurable riches of love and beneficence, or else of the trash and garbage of greed-bought lucre that is only worthy of the world and its unbridled passions.

The text above says much in a very concise commentary – a quality typical of only the finest authors, and this is not surprising when we consider that the Author is God. It tells us, first of all, three things about how we should appear before the Lord in service and worship:

1. We appear in God's appointed venue. ("*.... appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose*");
2. There is a God-ordained time for worship. There was a strict structure for this moment of time in Deuteronomy: "*Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose; in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles.*";

3. God ordains the manner in which we should appear both now, and in the judgment, before Him: "...they shall not appear before the LORD empty." From many modern pulpits, you will hear that this refers to coming before the Lord without a good offering in material treasures of which share the preacher usually gets the prominent share and the Lord gets the hindermost; but that is not the point – it is the treasure of the heart that pleases the Lord. *For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.* (Hosea 6:6)

Secondly, the text can be reduced to four things that God expects in worship:

1. He demands we WORSHIP Him. The men in Deuteronomy were to APPEAR before the Lord. I need not remind those who take the trouble of reading this clumsily written devotion that the only means by which any approach the Almighty God is on bended knee. *23 But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. 24 God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.* (John 4:23-24) *Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.* (Matt 4:10) There are churches today who have a lot of SOME kind of spirit, but lack a reliance on Holy Scripture. There is another kind of church in our day that has much biblical truth, but lack any spirit of love that brands them as 'Christian.' Spirit and Truth must be joined in worship.
2. God has appointed the proper place for worship – the CHURCH! Based on that very same model for His first institution (Marriage), God instituted the Church. *...upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* (Matt 16:18) Jesus refers to Himself (the Rock of Ages, 1 Cor 10:4) - not the PEBBLE that was Peter. The Church is the Israel of God. It is becoming more and more difficult to find a church that exalts the Word of God above the imaginations of the heart of man; but we must be seeking that true church always as a pilgrim seeks the City of God, for God counsels it: *25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.* (Heb 10:25) Just as our Lord Jesus cleansed the Temple of the money changers, so today must our hearts be cleared of fleshly desires and greed. The church is a place to form the righteous habits that overcome those of sinful living that predominate outside her gates – a place to learn of the Lord and to worship Him only!
3. God has established a TIME for worship. There are three times in the year specified in the introductory text in addition to the weekly Sabbath. As most Christian scholars know, Jesus did not make the Law of the Lord less sovereign, but MORE so. He added the spiritual dimension that is fueled by LOVE and not compulsion. In addition, rather than a weekly day devoted to the worship of God, we now have SEVEN days devoted to God. It is Christ that works through us in good works. We have our Sabbath rest in Christ every moment of the day. We can lay claim to no goodness of our own. Our day of worship begins at first wakening of the day. We seek Him early as the Psalmist proclaims. (Psalms 63:1 – General George Patton's favorite text, by the way) Since the day is a gift of God, we must forever be grateful in acknowledging that gift at first light – or even before. As the waning light of the Morning Star appears on the horizon, what a fitting time to lift our praises and thanks to Him – for He is figuratively, the Morning Star and the Gate of the Day! (Rev. 22:16 and 2 Peter 1:19)
4. God has established limits and circumstances for our worship. He demands REVERENCE! Our liturgical form of worship in the Anglican tradition (and other Reformed churches) according to the old Book of Common Prayer assures the avenue for that reverence. *"9 Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which*

*corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?"* Heb 12:9 (KJV) The great vigor in ministry of our day is that of "accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative" as Bing Crosby crooned. But God's Word is at least as full of negatives as it is of positives. For example, there are seven "shalt not's" in the Ten Commandments. The reason for this is the fact that man's imagination is always to more and more evil, and it must be curbed by limits – "*they shall not appear before the LORD empty.*" Now does this mean that we must pay gold or silver to worship? Not at all! But we must bring SOMETHING of value before the Lord, but WHAT? How about humility, faith, hope, love, repentance, etc. What gives value to these qualities? It is what GOD values. Men value silver and gold, but God owns every vein of gold and ore of silver in the Universe. He needs it not; but He does value the things that imitate His own virtues, and those are high lighted in love and mercy.

Every person reading this devotion will remember the widow's mite as it was given out of great need. It amounted to more than all of the gold coins tossed in the Temple horn. If those two mites were deposited in a bank, 2,000 years ago, at 5% interest (compounded semi-annually) it would amount to more than all of the available currency in the world today. Imagine how much interest that offering will garner in the eternity of years to come!

How sad it will be for us to appear before the Lord with no stars in our crown – no brothers, sisters, mother, father, neighbor! His blood was sufficient for all, yet we have kept it a secret! Our works of righteousness (which are His) should be in the treasure chest we bring before the Lord. What of the remembrance of our morning, noon and evening prayers? What about our compassions for the poor, the weak, the destitute? If we are empty of these, we have not conformed to the "*shalt not*" cited above.

There are positives as well. *Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.* (2 Cor 9:7) I tell the youth of my church that there is no more direct way of giving to God than in caring for the widows and orphans, the hungry, thirsty and naked. *Insomuch as ye have done it unto these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.* Our gifts to God must not be dedicated to the enrichment of the pockets of greedy or hypocritical ministers. The treasures of the heart are the things upon which God places the highest premium. Our love convinces us to share with the poor, not a Commandment written on a stone table.

How do we appear before the Lord – empty of love, of heart, of soul? Or do we appear before the Lord full of hope, love and faith; of mercy, sacrifice and a good testimony?