

Mowing the Lawn or Maintaining the Estate
Malachi 1:6-14

“If a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well. Maintaining the Kasper Estate,” as we called our little corner lot, “is more than just pushing the mower over every square foot of grass. It also involves trimming the edges, raking up any mounds the mower spits out, pulling the weeds out of the flowerbeds, trimming the hedges, and sweeping the sidewalk. If you do each of these things every week not only will the estate look nice all the time but it will also be easier to keep up. But, you know son, doing something well involves more than just *how* you do it; it involves *why* you do it.”

About this time, dad’s preteen son wasn’t listening too well anymore. Instead, I was thinking how it seemed that dad’s “lectures” always come at such inopportune times ... like when I wanted to play ball with the neighbors or when my favorite TV show was coming on. What I didn’t realize at the time was that Dad was trying to impart some timeless wisdom to his son.

When I was first given the responsibility of caring for the estate, I was thrilled. There was a sense of pride at this right of passage and the fact that dad trusted me with this responsibility. Besides, I enjoyed mowing the lawn and all the other parts that went with it. There was a sense of satisfaction and pride when I was done.

But something happened; the newness of the job wore off. Somewhere along the way maintaining the estate turned into mowing the lawn, a chore. I did it because it had to be done. There were other, more exciting things to do. The sooner I finished the better. So, I did the least I could get away with. The lawn got mowed, but our corner lot no longer appeared to be an estate.

This is what happened to the Israelites. They returned from exile all excited about being back home. They rebuilt their homes and villages. They rebuilt the temple, not as spectacular as

the one Solomon had built, but they were thrilled to have a place to worship. And worship they did – with all the pomp and ritual that God required. If you asked them why they worshipped with such excitement they would trip over their words to tell you how great their God is. They would tell you that their perfect and holy God required perfect and holy worship.

But somewhere along the way the newness of the temple and the excitement of worship wore off; worship became a chore (**Read Text**).

Did you notice that the Israelites didn't disobey God by refusing to worship or by worshipping other gods? If you'd ask them why they go to temple they'd respond, "We go to temple because we're supposed to go to temple. We sacrifice because we're supposed to sacrifice. It's what we do." They went through the motions of worship and did the least they thought they could get away with. The worship they once couldn't wait to offer and gave with great joy had become little more than a chore.

Listen to how Eugene Petersen presents verses 7-8:

You say, "How do we despise you?" By your shoddy, sloppy, defiling worship.

You ask, "What do you mean, 'defiling'? What's defiling about it?"

When you say, "The altar of God is not important anymore; worship of God is no longer a priority," that's defiling. And when you offer worthless animals for sacrifices in worship, animals that you're trying to get rid of – blind and sick and crippled animals – isn't that defiling? Try a trick like that with your banker or your senator – how far do you think that will get you?

They were doing the least they could get away with and then complained that the whole worship experience had just gone flat and it wasn't worth going to temple anymore. Instead of bringing the best of the flock or herd, as God required and deserved, they brought the worst, the ones of little value, the ones they were going to get rid of anyway. Instead of bringing the best, the people brought the leftovers. And the priests, the ones who were supposed to lead the people in worship, performing the ceremonies, and acting on behalf of the people before God, **let them**

do it. The when God calls them on it they reply, “What? How come you’re so upset? We came. We did our duty. The lawn got mowed.”

But doing something well involves more than just *how* you do it; it involves *why* you do it. At the time I didn’t see it but now I understand why Dad wanted the yard treated as an estate. Dad felt that a properly kept estate reflected a general state of well being in the family. He was proud of his family and did not want to give the appearance of neglect. But, more importantly, when the lawn looked good, it reflected the attitude of the person who did the work. Dad wanted me to do a good job because he wanted the neighbors to see what kind of son he had.

In a similar way, the Israelites had lost sight of why God wanted them to worship the way he prescribed. What the Israelites failed to realize was that how they worshipped reflected on them as a nation and, ultimately, on God. God wanted to be proud of His people. They were to be a people that were holy, separate from the world. They were to be an example to the world of how to have a right relationship with God and, equally important, what kind of God he was.

Instead, the lackluster worship showed the Israelites to be a people who didn’t care. Because of the worthless worship of the people, God’s name and reputation was as defiled as the sick and deformed animals that were sacrificed to Him. Now, what kind of God willingly accepts the worst offerings instead of the best? God was to be honored among all the nations. But when even God’s own people would not give Him respect and honor, what kind of God would others believe Him to be?

But the *why* of doing a task goes much deeper than what others see. Marchiene Rienstra, a pastor in the Reformed Church, wrote an article in the Grand Rapids Press several years ago entitled, “Work Is Love Made Visible.” In it she states, “*It suddenly became clear to me that I was the recipient of other people’s love through the work well done from which I benefited. And*

when I saw the work I did, no matter how mundane, as a way of expressing love for others, it took on a whole new and meaningful dimension.”

When I did a shoddy job of mowing the lawn, only doing what I had to do or what I thought I could get away with was I showing Dad how much I loved him or just thinking about myself? When the Israelites brought sick and deformed animals for sacrifice and went through the motions of ritual rather than giving the best of the flock and rejoicing before God, how much love were they showing God?

What are we offering God and how are we doing it? Are we maintaining the estate or just mowing the lawn? Paul tells, *“I urge you, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship”* (Rm.12:1). You see, worship includes the hour or two we spend together on Sunday mornings; but it also includes our whole life, everything we do. So, is Sunday worship something you just can’t wait to participate in? Or has it become a chore? Do you wake up each morning with expectancy, desiring to give it to God no matter what the circumstances? Or do you, when you finally succumb to the alarm clock, crawl out of bed thinking, “Not again,” and then proceed to do as little as you can get away with?

The better question we should ask ourselves each day is “*Why?*” The *Why* we offer God in worship directs all the intention, motivation, and attitude to *What* and *How* we offer ourselves in worship. Do I worship because I have to *or* want to? Do I worship because I love God and want to show Him and everyone else how much I love God? Again, Paul directs us, *“Whether you eat or drink (yes, even the mundane ordinary of everyday life) or what ever you do, do it all for the glory of God!”* (1Cor.10:31).

The world – our neighbors, colleagues, coworkers, family, friends – the world is looking at what we, collectively as a church and individually as Christians, are offering up to God.

What do they see? Leftovers? Lackluster worship? When we give God only our leftover time, money, talent, and energy and when we only do however little it takes so long as we can say we went to church and did our duty, then we are defiling God, his name, and his love.

But, when we are so in love with God that everything we do is an act of worship, then our work is “love made visible” and we glorify God. When it is our desire to maintain the estate of God’s Kingdom rather than just mow the lawn, it is then that God will say, *“My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations.”*

Give of your best to the Master
Give of the strength of your youth
Give him your heart’s adoration
Give him the best that you have

Give of your best to the Master
Give God first place in your heart
Give God first place in your service
Consecrate every part

Give of your best to the Master
Naught else is worthy His love
Give Him your heart’s adoration
Give Him the best that you have

(From hymn “Give of your Best to the Master” Howard B Grosse)

What do you say? Let’s make our little corner lot in God’s Kingdom look like the estate that it is.