

What is Worship?

Scripture Text: John 4:7-26

Introduction

Worship! What is it? I have been concerned about worship for some time. I have tried to remind myself what it is when I gather with God's people, the church. If we asked people on the street, they may tell us that worship is what you do in a church on Sunday. Many of us may agree with that. For some of us, worship is what we do when the preacher is not preaching. It occurs during the first half of the time together on Sunday morning. For some, worship only happens when we feel it, when something like good music moves us. Are any of these things descriptions of worship? What does worship really look like? In a very simple way, worship is recognizing the worth of someone or something. Since God created us for Himself and He is the Being of infinite worth, we ought to worship Him. Therefore, maybe a more important question is what does God desire in our worship of Him? That is the main issue we will address today and this passage gives us a good indication of what God expects in worship.

An Encounter At A Well

In this passage, Jesus left Judea and headed towards Galilee. He passed through the region of Samaria and came to a town in Samaria called Sychar. While in Sychar, Jesus, wearied from His journey, stopped at Jacob's well around noon. While He was at the well, a woman from Samaria came to draw water. Seeing her at the well, Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." For anyone of us who might be tired and thirsty, this might seem like a completely reasonable thing to do. However, this was remarkable given the situation of the time. The woman was probably shocked that a Jewish man would speak openly to a Samaritan woman. Not only did the Jews avoid contact with the Samaritans, but Jewish men avoided speaking with women in public. The Samaritans were the Jewish people's northern neighbors, who lived just south of Galilee. However, the Jews and the Samaritans were not friendly to one another. In fact, John wrote that the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. The Jews probably treated Samaritans no better than Gentiles, considering them to be half-breed descendants of the pagan Assyrians. The Jews would not have conversed with them in public, much less, asked them for a drink of water. Jesus' attitude toward this despised group was radically different.

In response to her astonishment, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that if she knew Who He really was, she would have asked Him for water and He would have given her "living water". The woman took Jesus literally and misunderstood Him, just as Nicodemus did (John 3:4). Jesus frequently spoke in terms of the visible, physical world to teach about spiritual issues. For instance, Jesus referred to Himself as the Bread of Life. He referred to our spiritual awakening as being "born again". The phrase "living water" literally meant fresh spring water, but Jesus referred to it as the Holy Spirit dwelling within a believer. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that if she had this "living water", she would never thirst again. This would have been greatly desired, as water was, and still is, a valuable commodity. We may experience periodic droughts that result in farm crises and

water rationing, but a well in a desert can be the difference between life and death. Intrigued with this living water, the Samaritan woman asked Jesus to give her this water so she would never be thirsty again. Who would not ask for this? And so, Jesus told her about this living water, but it was not what she expected.

Worship Involves Being Honest With Ourselves

Here is where things get more interesting in the Samaritan woman's encounter at the well. So far, Jesus has asked her for water. He then intrigued her with a statement about living water that would forever quench her thirst. She asked for this water and Jesus confronted the woman with her life. She may have thought they were talking about her physical needs, but Jesus was more concerned about her spiritual needs. Sometimes what we really need is not what we are seeking. Look at the next few verses.

John 4:16–18 ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.”

She asked for water that would forever quench her thirst, and Jesus asked about her husband. Interestingly, the woman responded to Jesus with *some* of the truth. She had had five husbands who had either died or divorced her. We do not know for sure what happened with her previous husbands, but the implication is that there was some immorality. More than that, she was currently living with a man who was *not her husband*. When Jesus said the one you have is not your husband, He implied that merely living together does not constitute a marriage. Sharing a house with someone is not marriage. As we have learned during the past few weeks and during the marriage conference, marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman and God who commit to certain obligations in the marriage. While it might seem like a good idea to society, living together under the same roof without the commitment of marriage is not God's design for us and it is not what is best for us. Jesus called the woman out on her sin.

Receiving the life giving water of the Spirit includes a correct examination of ourselves. This is true of worship. If we are to worship God correctly, we must confess all to Him. He already knows it anyway. Why would we try to hide it from Him? Why would we try to cover up our sin before the One Who knows everything about us anyway? If you try to hide your sin from God, you will only deceive yourself. We must surrender all of ourselves to Him. By nature, we tend to resist when someone else confronts our sin. We do not like it. We run away from it. We are good about pointing out other people's sin, but when someone reveals our sin, we look for ways to avoid it. Like so many people, when the truth pierces our soul, we change the subject. That is what this Samaritan woman did. She turned Jesus' pursuit of her heart into an evasive conversation about different perspectives on worship. In His mercy Jesus met her right there, for ultimately, all of life is about worship.

Worship Involves the Right Location

The Samaritan woman's next question had to do with *where* we worship God. Have you ever believed or been told that you come *to church* to worship God? Well, that is not entirely true. For one, we do not come to church, because *we are the church*. Anyone who has repented of sin and confessed Jesus Christ as Lord is part of the Church — the Body of Christ. Secondly, we do not come to worship God, at least we do not begin worshipping God with the Church. We ought to be worshipping God before we get here. We will look at that aspect of worship later. For now, I would like to address the issue of *where* we ought to worship God. Is there a place designated for worshipping God? The answer is "yes". Look at the following verses.

John 4:19–22 ¹⁹ *The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."* ²¹ *Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.*

The issue was the Samaritans worshipped God in a different place than the Jews. They had built their temple on Mount Gerizim, which was their holy mountain — their holy place. When they worshipped God, they would go to this place. The Jews built their own temple on a mount in Jerusalem. That was their holy place. However, if Jesus had argued with the Samaritan woman about which was the "right" temple (like so many of us do about the "right" church), the woman would not have faced herself and her sin. The way Jesus responded to her is very instructive. He turned the conversation away from the place of worship to the nature of worship. He basically said that the place of worship is not important. It is not in Jerusalem. It is not in Samaria. It is not at Good Hope Baptist. It is somewhere else. So, where is it? Right before he was stoned by those stiff-necked people of the Jewish high council, Stephen told them the following.

Acts 7:48–50 ⁴⁸ *Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ⁴⁹ "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?"*

God does not live in buildings made by human hands. He does not live in structures made of wood, brick or stone. This raises the question as to where the "house of God" is and where we should worship Him. Paul spoke about that issue, too.

1 Corinthians 3:16 ¹⁶ *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*

Ephesians 2:22 ²² *In [Jesus] you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

Jesus introduced a radical idea where people do not have to travel to a physical location to worship God. God's people are able to worship Him in every place. We can do this

because the Holy Spirit dwells within us, and therefore God's people everywhere become the new temple where God dwells. Where the temple of God is, there worship should exist. How worshipful is God's temple in you?

Worship Involves Both Mind and Spirit

In saying that the Jews worship what they know, Jesus acknowledged that salvation comes from the Jews. The whole Old Testament, which taught about salvation, was from the Jewish people, and the Messiah Himself came from the Jews and not from the Samaritans, or any other group. This was a truth that the Samaritans had likely not known or had ignored. This also leads to another aspect of worship — knowing the truth. We have to know what is true in order to worship rightly. Truth is an important part of the whole dynamic of worship. Look at the next two verses.

John 4:23–24 ²³ *But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

Jesus said that the time was coming, in fact was here, when those who truly worship God will do so “in spirit and truth”. The time had come where people needed to remove old barriers to worshipping God, such as where they needed to be in order to worship God. God is seeking true worshippers to worship Him. He created us to worship Him. That is our purpose. There are many different ideas about what worship looks like when a church gathers. For instance, some churches focus so much on proclaiming the truth that they have very little to do with other aspects of worship. Some call them the frozen chosen because nothing will move them to worship God except intellectualizing about God. On the other extreme, there are those who are “full of the spirit” but lack much of the truth of God's Word. They may have the longest worship gatherings, the most passionate display of praise, and the loudest prayers of anyone on the planet. One way I have heard this described is like this: Where you have all truth and no spirit, the people tend to dry up. Where you have all spirit and no truth, the people tend to blow up. Where you have truth and spirit, the people tend to grow up.

We need both truth and spirit. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that her worship lacked knowledge, a critical aspect of genuine worship. If we do not know the truth, what God has chosen to reveal to us, we will worship the wrong way or the wrong things. Jesus also told the woman that God is Spirit and not flesh. Those who worship God are born again, or born from the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, thus, moves us to worship God in the Spirit. It may be helpful to consider our spiritual worship linked to our passionate response to God. God made us emotional beings, therefore, our spiritual worship should be linked to our emotions. For many of us, we tend to repress our feelings. We want to control our reactions. Do not let anyone see what is going on inside of you. Churches have characterized certain emotions as acceptable and others as unacceptable. Worship without emotions allows us to keep God at arm's length and us

in control. Are you worshipping God with the truth of His Word and by the moving of His Spirit? Both are needed. To neglect one is to offer half-hearted worship.

Worship Involves Recognizing Who Jesus Is

Part of worshipping in truth is recognizing God for Who He says He is. We will spend more time on this next week as we look at acknowledging Who God is and what He has done. Jesus mentioned something at the close of this passage that indicates something about worshipping correctly. It points to knowing Who He is. Look at the next verses.

John 4:25–26 ²⁵ *The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.”* ²⁶ *Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”*

This harkens back to verse ten when Jesus told the Samaritan woman that if she knew Who He really was, she would have asked Him for water and He would have given her “living water”. A person’s deepest spiritual longing to know God personally is satisfied forever in Jesus Christ. The Samaritan woman needed what only Jesus could give. She had been a poor steward of her thirst—a thirst only Jesus can satisfy. She had spent most of her life running to broken cisterns that hold no water (Jeremiah 2:13), now Jesus offered the only water that would satisfy her, and us—the grace of the gospel.

Recognizing who Jesus is involves a response on our part. It should compel us to worship Him. It should also compel us to love Him with our whole being. Knowing that Jesus, God in the flesh, willingly died so that you would not have to die, ought to invoke love from our whole being. In fact, this is the *heart of worship*, a total attitude that directs our whole self to God. When an expert in the Jewish Law asked Jesus what the most important commandment was, Jesus responded with the following.

Mark 12:29–30 ²⁹ *Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’* ³⁰ *And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”*

The totality of worship involves the totality of our being. Worship God by loving Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. That is worship!

Conclusion

In closing, what is worship? Worship is recognizing the infinite worth of God. It is an attitude of placing value on God with our whole being. It is not limited by location, but is something we do wherever we are. It involves truth, knowing the truth about God and knowing the truth about ourselves. However, it is not limited to just our mind, what we think about God or ourselves, but also how the Spirit moves us. Worship is ultimately about praising and loving Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. All of creation was created by Him and for Him (Colossians 1:16), so let us love Him in all that we do and with all that we are. That is worship and that is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!