

Worship Now

John 4:20-24

We are in the 4th week of our 40 Days of Prayer and the theme for this week is “Worship Now.” Worship is an important part of being a Christian and an important part of prayer. As you look at worship throughout the Bible, you see many examples and many places that God calls people to worship. In fact, worship is central to the very purpose for why we were created. We were created to glorify God, to know and enjoy him and respond with praise and adoration to the wonders of who he is and what he’s done.

So throughout the Bible we see God calling people to turn away from sin and idolatry to worship him. He did that with the people of Israel when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land. He established a covenant with them and gave them many instructions for worship. These included building a house of worship called the Tabernacle, it included priests who would assist the people. It included sacrifices and holy days, celebrations and feasts. Worship was to be a regular part of their society – a regular pattern for people’s lives.

In the New Testament we see that Jesus continued to emphasize the importance of worship in the lives of his disciples, and as they spread the gospel and planted churches and wrote the books that make up our New Testament it’s easy to see that God’s desire is for Christians and churches to worship him. He is gathering people from every nation, tribe, and tongue and making us into a holy temple, making us into a kingdom of priests to declare his excellencies and sing his praises. We were created and redeemed so that we would worship our Creator and Savior.

So worship needs to be a regular part of our lives and prayers. Worship and prayer go hand in hand. We worship through prayers of praise and adoration. Even prayers of confession are prayers of worship. When we sing in church we are actually praying together in worship. When you pray alone or with others and focus on praising God, you are engaged in worship. We really can’t overemphasize the importance that God places on worship in our lives.

But there’s something else I want us to see about worship this morning, and that is that there are many places in the Bible where even though the people were

involved in worshipping God, it wasn't pleasing to him. In fact, there were times when his people would go to the temple to worship and it was detestable to him.

The Bible shows us that there are two ways God responds to worship – it can either be pleasing to him or despicable. Sacrifices, praises, songs and prayers of adoration can be welcomed or detestable. Scripture portrays our worship like incense or an aroma that is rising up to God and it can either be pleasing to him or a revolting stench in his nostrils.

So worship is critical and commanded and something all of us must grow in and engage in, but worship can either be pleasing or detestable God. Your prayers and songs and offerings and raised hands and shouts of praise on Sunday mornings or throughout the week can be wonderful and pleasing, or they can be meaningless, empty, and even a stench in God's nostrils.

So this morning, as we focus on prayer and worship, I want us to look at what makes the difference. We are going to look at a passage in John 4, which has the key verse in our devotionals this week. In this chapter we're told the story of a Samaritan woman who had a life-changing encounter with Jesus and part of this encounter will help us see the difference between empty worship and worship that's pleasing to God.

I want to share a little background information about Jews and Samaritans as we get started so we can understand what's going on. About a thousand years before this encounter, the northern ten tribes of Israel separated from the southern two tribes and established their own kingdom. They had their own king and their own place of worship. Their capital was Samaria and their center for worship was on Mt. Gerizim.

About 300 years after they separated, the northern kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrian empire. Most of the people were deported and only a few Jews were left. Assyria then sent people from other nations to live in that region with the remaining Jews and they eventually intermarried. These people became known as Samaritans and the Jews in Judah (to the south) wanted nothing to do with them. Even at the time of Christ the Samaritans had their own territory and their own place of worship, separate from the Jews in Judah who continued to worship in Jerusalem.

So one day, when Jesus and his disciples were returning from a trip to Jerusalem, they decided to go through the region of Samaria and came to a town called Sychar. Outside that town, at the base of a mountain, which happened to be Mt. Gerizim, there was a well, and Jesus stopped there to rest while his disciples went into town. While he was resting, a woman came to draw water and Jesus entered a conversation with her. They eventually talked about her living situation and Jesus revealed that he knew she had been married five times and was currently living with a man who was not her husband.

At that point in the conversation, she brought up the fact that Jews and Samaritans had separate places for worship. Perhaps she was thinking about her sin and that she needed to go offer the prescribed sacrifice for it. But she was a Samaritan and Jesus was a Jew, and the question was, where should she go? Location was very important because it was believed that in order for your sacrifices or prayers to be acceptable to God and atone for your sins it had to be done in the right location. Acceptable worship was linked to going to the right place and worshipping in the prescribed way. People assumed that if they did that, their worship would be pleasing to God.

The problem was that Jews believed that location had to be Jerusalem and Samaritans believed it had to be Mt. Gerizim, which is where Jesus and this woman were standing. So as we jump into this conversation, that's the context we're jumping into. It starts with the woman speaking...

John 4:20-24.

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.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.”

So this woman thought she had to go to a certain location in order for her worship and sacrifice to be acceptable, but Jesus shows her a radically different way of thinking. It didn't matter where she went for worship. The location and regulations for worship weren't what God was looking for. He was looking for

something else. Jesus told her that true worshippers – the kind of worshippers that God seeks and is pleased with – are those who worship in spirit and in truth. God is spirit and he is seeking those who worship in spirit and in truth.

That's a different kind of worship. What does he have in mind? Let's think about spirit and truth. First of all, what does it mean to worship in spirit? There are two clues in this passage. The first is that Jesus presents this idea as a contrast to the idea of worshipping at a certain location. To worship in spirit is different than worshipping at a physical place.

The second gives further clarity and is when Jesus says, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." So to worship in spirit is something spiritual, it's about communing and connecting with God who is spirit. We are able to do this because we are not just physical beings. We too have a spirit. In Christ, our spirit has been made alive to God and we are able to connect and relate to him deep in our inner being. There's an aspect of personal relationship. And that's the kind of worship God is seeking. He doesn't just want a person to show up at a temple and go through the motions. He wants there to be spiritual communion with him.

A good example of this is King David and he describes worshipping in spirit in Psalm 63:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;

my soul thirsts for you;

my flesh faints for you,

as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.

³ Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.

⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.

⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,

⁶ when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

⁷ for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.

⁸ My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

This is something far deeper and personal than someone showing up to offer a sacrifice at a temple, or in our context, far deeper and more personal than someone showing up to church on Sunday and going through the motions of singing. David was communing with God in spirit. Worshipping deep in his inner being. He was longing to connect with God and find refreshment in him. This is what I think Jesus meant when he spoke of worshipping in spirit.

But what does it mean to worship in truth? I've always thought that this had something to do with biblical truth – that the worshipper needs to have knowledge of the truth about God and the gospel in order to truly worship. And I think this is an important part of it. But I also think it goes deeper than that to include the idea of authenticity.

Throughout OT history, there would be times when God was filled with anger toward the Israelites when they came to worship him, because they were just going through the motions. They were in the right place and doing the right things, yet their worship was detestable to him because their hearts and the rest of their lives were full of sin and they were devoted to idols. They came for worship, but had a lifestyle of sin. So their worship was completely hypocritical.

One of the passages that talks about this is Isaiah 1:11-17:

¹¹ “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?

says the Lord;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams

and the fat of well-fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls,

or of lambs, or of goats.

¹² “When you come to appear before me,

who has required of you

this trampling of my courts?

¹³ Bring no more vain offerings;

incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—

I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts

my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
¹⁵ When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause.

His people were worshipping in hypocrisy, not in truth, and God was sick of it. His desire is that they would honor him with the rest of their lives so when they came to worship him, it was real. God is seeking authentic worshippers. Those who worship not only in form, but with all of their lives. Romans 12:1-2 is a great description of what this means: *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

It isn't going through the motions of worship that God is looking for, he's looking for a person's life surrendered to him in devotion – a lifestyle of worship. This was worship that was holy and acceptable to God. Our acts of worship need to come from a life of worship and they will be pleasing to God. And that's the idea I think Jesus has in mind with worshipping in truth.

True worshippers worship in spirit and in truth – it's spiritual and authentic worship that overflows from a lifestyle of devotion to God. False worshippers worship in empty form and hypocrisy – it's just physical and fake – going through the motions without communing with God or living for him.

So as we seek to grow in prayer through worship, this is something we need to examine and be aware of in our lives. It's not about showing up to church on Sundays and singing a few songs, joining in prayer, and listening to a sermon. It's about worshipping the Father in spirit and in truth. It's about a whole life of devotion to God, seeking him and praising him. Authentic communion with God is the kind of worship that is acceptable and pleasing to God.

We have some time to enter into worship now this morning and respond to God's leading in our hearts. Maybe you realize you've just been going through the motions in your life when it comes to worship and you need to take some time now to confess to him and repent as we get started. Let's quiet our hearts and turn to him – worshippers who worship in spirit and in truth.