

WORSHIP



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Email: info@preachtheword.com

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*What is worship?
How do you worship?*

by Pastor David Legge

“Worship”

Now if you care to turn in your Bible to John chapter 4, we're looking at the subject of 'Worship'. This is a subject which, perhaps, ought to be one of the first thing that we consider in a study of the basics of the Christian life.

We're going to see the answer to the question: what is it? What is worship? The answer to the question: why is it so important, if it is important at all? And how can we know how to do it? And of course, to do it correctly, that must mean to do it biblically. All these questions inevitably arise when we address this subject of 'Worship' - but what is it to worship God?

The word 'Worship'

If you take the word 'worship' in our English language, it tells us a tale of what worship is. When you consider that it is made up of two Anglo-Saxon words that really mean, put together 'worth-ship', or 'worthiness'. Worship is bringing the praise due to something or someone who is worthy of it, who shows worthiness of praise and worship.

Now there are several Greek words in the New Testament that describe worship, but one is 'proskeneo', which means 'to kiss the hand' - it is the picture of the slave, perhaps, paying homage to his master. When he enters into the presence of his lord, this is an act, a mark of reverence and respect that also implies affection - to kiss his hand, to greet him in such a way.

Worship in the Bible

Now, if you're familiar at all with the Scriptures, you will know that worship is an overarching theme of all from Genesis to the book of Revelation. When God gave the ten commandments, in the first and second commandment - although they were prohibitions to worship one God, the true and living God, and not to bow down to any other idols - there is intrinsic, inferred within that, to worship the true and living God; that's why we ought not to bow down to idols. It is a call to worship, to worship the one true extant God, the God of heaven, the God of creation. As we go through the Old Testament we see that the book of Exodus, where the ten commandments are enshrined, has 27 chapters devoted to the construction of the tabernacle, which was the forerunner to the temple, which was a structure in which the people of God, Israel, worshipped God. Twenty-seven chapters are devoted to its construction and to the worship that would go on in it and around it.

When we move from Exodus to the next book, Leviticus, we see that it amounts basically

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“Assurance”

as boring, tedious, burdensome, and I have to subscribe that sometimes that is the aura that it gives. We communicate at times that it ought to be boring and long-faced. Tozer put it like this in his great work: 'There is more healing joy in five minutes of worship than there is in five nights of revelry' - because worship renews the spirit, just like rest renews the body. If worship is worship, it will change us, it will revive us, it will quicken and renew us, and that's why when we come to worship privately and publicly, we ought to be expecting God to touch our lives, to change us!

5) *Our worship should produce obedience*

Reverence, discipline, preparation, expectancy - and then almost finally, penultimately, maturity. You see, it's only when we begin to worship that we begin to grow. If you're not worshipping you can't be growing, because you become like what you adore and idolise. If you study God and truly worship Him, you'll be taken up in a holy ecstasy, but your worship will end with a holy obedience. You will become like the One that you adore. He who does not worship will never be holy - it's as simple as that.

6) *We are to worship with completeness*

Then finally, we are to worship with completeness, worship with completeness. 'Fill Thou my life, O Lord my God, in every part with praise'. Saint Augustine said, 'A Christian should be a hallelujah from head to toe'. It's not just about time, it's not about words, it's not just about spirit, it's about everything: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your expected worship'.

Your attitude to God, especially as we come to Him in worship, is the true monitor of your spirituality. Did you hear that? Your attitude to God as you come to worship privately or publicly, is the true monitor of your spirituality. Worship is that which you give to your interest, worship is that which you give your highest enthusiasm to and your devotion to, and I trust that it is given solely to God. As a tear magnifies your grief, as laughter magnifies your humour, as a smile magnifies your joy: worship magnifies God.

A Concluding Challenge

Can I ask you two questions as I finish: Will you all commit yourselves to the discipline of daily worship? Secondly: Will you put actual worship into your acts of worship?

*'That I may love Thee too, O Lord,
Almighty as Thou art,
For Thou hast stooped to ask of me
The love of my poor heart'.*

to 27 chapters of liturgical manual as to how the priests should worship in that tabernacle. So 27 chapters of Exodus regarding the construction and the worship that would go on in the tabernacle, and in Leviticus 27 liturgical chapters on how to worship. Then we come to the book of Psalms - and we're excluding an awful lot of other writings in the Old Testament - but if you know anything about the Psalms, you will know that basically, to put it very bluntly, they are 150 chapters of the Jewish hymnal. It is the Old Testament hymnbook. The hymn books that we sing from...well, the Psalms are God-breathed hymns given to the Old Testament, and I would say also the New Testament people, some of them at least, wherewith to worship the Lord.

Then we come to the New Testament and we find that the theme and the trend is exactly the same; that worship is given number one priority in the life of the child of God, and in the life and existence of the church of God. None less than in our passage, John 4, when the Lord Jesus spoke to this woman and said: 'The hour cometh', verse 23, 'and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him'. Right at the beginning in the Gospel ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, He is laying down this foundational principle that God desires worship above all else. The Old Testament has testified to that fact, when the Lord Jesus Christ comes in His earthly ministry on the scene, His message is the same - uncontradicted and in continuity: God desires worship.

You remember Matthew chapter 4, when the Lord Jesus was in the wilderness being tested of the devil, and the devil invited Him to bow down and worship him. The Lord Jesus said in chapter 4 and verse 10: 'It is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve'. Later on we find, when He encounters Mary and Martha in their home in Bethany, Martha is encumbered about much serving, and the Lord Jesus elaborates on this theme of worship, and He says in Luke 10 verse 41 and 42: 'Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her' - and, of course, Mary was at the feet of the Lord Jesus in worship and in wonder.

The Lord Jesus is saying not only is worship the greatest priority, and ought to be number one in the life of the believer and the church, but it is given ultimate priority even over service. We, as children of God, ought to be worshippers before workers, Jesus says. The King ought to come before the King's business. Of course we see this right throughout the epistles after the Gospels. There are numerous practical guidelines as to how the church of Jesus Christ ought to worship, and how that worship ought to be conducted decently and in order. So I think you see that the whole gamut of Scripture is agreed: the number one occupation of a child of God, for us as a Christian, and corporately the church of the Lord Jesus, is to worship. Genesis tells us that is why we've been born; the whole Old Testament and New Testament tell us that it is the greatest

and highest function of the human soul; and we're told specifically through the gospel message that the new birth makes us able to worship the Lord as we ought, in spirit and in truth.

What place does worship occupy in your life?

Worship is not a part of the Christian life, worship is the Christian life! So, I'm asking you as an individual, and the Iron Hall as an assembly: what place does worship occupy in your life today? How are you as a worshipper? A. W. Tozer, who was a prophetic voice in the church many years ago, and has spoken into many situations even in our present-day, he being dead yet speaketh, said this on the subject of worship: 'I say that the greatest tragedy in the world today is that God has made man in His image, and made him to worship Him, made him to play the harp of worship before the face of God day and night; but he has failed God and dropped the harp - it lies voiceless at his feet'. He goes on to say: 'Worship acceptable to God is the missing crown jewel in evangelical Christianity'. That inspired him to write a book: 'Whatever Happened to Worship?'. Though worship, perhaps, might be in the church in the West today the most talked about subject, it has to be - I feel - the least experienced practice of the modern church: true worship.

Modern trends in worship

We hear of 'worship leaders', 'worship bands', 'worship books', 'worship songs', 'worship albums', 'worship actions', even 'worship classes' - but we need to ask ourselves today in the light of God's word: are all of these things worship? Thomas Carlyle, that man of God, put a definition of worship like this: 'Worship is transcendent wonder'. When you're caught up with God to such an extent that you almost feel you're in His very presence: transcendent wonder at His attributes, His nature, His person. We find it in Isaiah 6: 'In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD', Isaiah testified, 'high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple'. He heard the cherubim and seraphim cry: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, the whole earth is filled with His glory'. That is a picture of the worship that was due to God in His very temple, the course of heaven, and it is a picture of a high experience, a transcendent experience.

It would have to be said that the present trends in the church today are not of the 'holier than thou' type, but of the 'trendier than thou' type. I have to say it, that there is an attempt not to stretch for the highest point in worship in our churches, but to strike some low point that accommodates the most immature and carnal among us. When we look around, we see that programs in churches today are often geared to satisfying sight, sound and sense, rather than the spirit. You see, our society at large, secularly speaking, is a man-centred one - it has always been such. Particularly the 21st-century has become a pleasure-crazed society. As one author has put it, and it's the title of his book, we are

How do we worship?

Finally we answer the question: how do we worship? When do we worship? Not just on the Lord's day, but every day of our lives, even in our homes. But how do we worship? Well I've given you the obvious answer: it is God-centred and it's in spirit and truth, but let me give you five or six little pointers to help you in your worship.

1) We ought to worship with reverence

We ought to worship, according to the Scriptures at least, with reverence. One person has put it like this: 'Reverence is essential to worship'. Whilst we must never get to a point of worshipping God in formality, or in liturgy, at the same time I cannot understand the fad in evangelicalism today of how God can be worshipped casually. I think 'casuality' today in our modern age is going to be the greatest 'casualty' to us as believers when it comes to worship. Reverence must be our attitude and the overarching theme of everything that we bring to God in our worship - why? Because Christ is in our midst. I ask you today: if the Lord Jesus in His risen glorified form walked through the doors of the church into our midst, bodily, actually, visually - what would you do? Christ is in our midst, He walks among us, the glowing lampstand of His churches, He treads our aisles, He sits beside us in the pew, He searches every heart looking for those who worship Him truly in spirit and in truth. We see right throughout the Bible record that everyone who encountered this holy God, their experience was almost uniform: they fell at His feet as dead. They were trembling, quaking in terror before the Most High God! They were frightened, they were humbled, they disintegrated, they certainly were never bored, and they certainly were not casual in the presence of Almighty God - we must worship with reverence!

2) We must worship with discipline

Secondly, we must worship with discipline. Worship doesn't just happen, though we can have instances of spontaneous worship, it is a daily discipline that needs to be formed in all our lives. That's why it's a private exercise, not just a public one. I could go into more detail in that, but read the study on 'The Morning Watch', it's something that we have to prepare.

3) We must prepare for worship

There ought to be preparation to worship, public worship - don't just roll out of your bed and come to church, at least have some time with the Lord! Even preparation in the pew, someone has said: 'If you want to talk, talk to God' - that's what we're here for. We have to discipline ourselves in our own home life, and as Spurgeon put it so well: 'We ought to wash our faces everyday with a bath of praise'.

4) We should have an attitude of expectancy

Reverence, discipline, preparation - fourthly: expectancy. Sometimes worship is perceived

A distinguished explorer on one occasion was sent for a couple of years into the jungle, and he met some savages in the upper Amazon, and he attempted one day to teach them a lesson. He took them on a surging march for two days at extraordinary speed through the jungle. All went well for about two days, and then on the third day he got up that morning and the natives were all sitting around on their haunches looking very solemn. The chief simply explained to the explorer: 'They're waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies'. He took them so fast! They're waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies! My question is: have our spirits caught up with our souls? Have our spirits caught up with our prayers, all our expressions of biblical worship, whatever they may be - have our spirits been in them?

An expressive woman once entered a liturgical service, that is those who read their service and worship out of a book, and as the minister preached and become so caught up with his message, she exclaimed: 'Praise the Lord!'. A fellow a few people down the pew leaned over and whispered: 'Excuse me, but we don't praise the Lord in the Lutheran church'. A man further down the pew said: 'Yes, we do, it's on page number 19'. Now we laugh at that, and we often criticise those who worship the Lord through liturgy - but have we become formal in our worship? We can have our unwritten liturgy that we rhyme off to God, and it's as far from worship as the deadest service in existence in Christendom! As Vance Havner put it: 'Some of our services start at 11 o'clock sharp, and end at 12 o'clock dull'.

Worship does not need to be dull to be deep. In fact, if we are worshipping God through the word, and through the spirit, it will be the most exciting, exhilarating experience that we will know upon the earth. It's not just public worship, it is private worship. If we don't worship God seven days of the week, it is arguable whether we worship Him one day of the week on a Sunday. Our public worship far from excuses us from our secret worship. Matthew Henry put it like this: 'Where we have a tent, God must have an altar; where we have a house, He must have a church in it'. Do you worship God in the morning? Do you worship God as a family? It doesn't matter how long or how short it is, do you come and acknowledge God? Do you make a tent, a tabernacle, a church in your home to the Lord?

The reason why it's so important is that worship alone, of all the activities of believers, will continue in heaven and will occupy the host in glory forever, and they will rest not day or night saying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts'. You'll not evangelise for all eternity, you'll not pray for all eternity, you'll not Bible study for all eternity, but you will worship forever in heaven! Tozer said, 'Any man or woman on this earth who is bored or turned off by worship, is not ready for heaven'. Are you ready for heaven?

'Amusing Ourselves to Death'. This pleasure-centred, man-centred culture has influenced and infiltrated the church.

Who is worship for?

The ultimate question that faces us today is not only: 'What is true worship?', but we find the definition of true worship when we ask a further question - who is worship for? Who is worship for? Is worship to satisfy me, or is it to satisfy God? Now let me say, of course, that if it satisfies God it will certainly satisfy you - but what is our goal? Is our goal to be self-satisfied, or is our goal to bring praise and glory, and delight and blessing to the heart of God? It's not that our needs are unimportant, don't misunderstand what I'm saying, but what it does mean is that our focus should not be on ourselves, and if our focus is continually God-ward, all our needs will be met as we are lost in wonder, love and praise of Him. But when we see worship services increasingly becoming more entertainment focused, when we hear worship songs increasingly using the words 'I', 'me', and 'mine', rather than 'Thou', 'Thee', and 'Thy' - what are we to conclude? When preaching becomes directed more to the topics of our felt needs, rather than textual exposition of what God has declared we need and we must have?

If this is where we have moved, in any shape or form, we've become more man-centred, it will cease to be worship - and eventually our doctrine and our practice will be corrupted. Our question at the end of worship services ought not to be: 'What did you think of the service?', our question ought to be in our own individual hearts, 'What did God think of the service?'. We need a reformation and a revival in true spiritual worship, in spirit and according to truth.

What is worship?

Now let's answer first of all what worship is and what worship is not. First of all: *worship is God-centred*. We've led up to that: it is God-centred. A missionary called Robert Kennedy on one occasion visited the Amazon, and he conversed with a Brazilian Indian who had recently come to faith in Christ, but he didn't know him. He asked him this question: 'What do you most like to do?'. Kennedy expected the answer: 'Hunting with bows and arrows', or 'canoeing', or something like that; but the Indian answered, 'Being occupied with God'. He said to the translator: 'Ask him again, something has perhaps been lost in translation', but the same answer came back, 'Being occupied with God'. That's a tremendous definition of what true worship is. Tozer put it like this: 'We are called as Christians to an everlasting contemplation and preoccupation with God. True worship seeks union with its beloved, and an active effort to close the gap between the heart and the God it adores' - preoccupied with God!

Now let me dissect this for a moment, because if you are preoccupied with God in your worship, you will be oblivious and unconscious to whom? To yourself! Geoffrey Thomas,

that Welsh Baptist, put it like this: 'In true worship men have little thought of the means of worship, their thoughts are upon God. True worship is characterised by self-effacement, and is lacking in any self-consciousness'. When you get beyond the debate of what's right and what's wrong, to an extent, in the how of worship, and you get to the point of the Who of worship, that you're so taken up with God, preoccupied with Him, that you forget about yourself and perhaps even forget about those around you - caught up with God. It is God-centred.

What does it mean to worship in truth?

Here secondly in our reading we find that it is in spirit and truth. Now what does it mean to worship in truth? Well, first of all, in truth regarding the object of our worship. Worship must be adoring contemplation of the true and the living God, as He has revealed Himself in the Lord Jesus Christ and in His Holy Word, Scripture. We ought not to worship anyone other than the God of the word, and how He has revealed Him in the incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus. So the object of our worship must be true, that's why people worshipping false gods around our world, whether they be Allah or whoever, they are not worshipping the one true and living God because Allah is not the God of the Bible. Added to that is also the act of worship, we ought to worship God in our act according to truth. To worship God in truth is to worship God as He has commanded us to worship. He doesn't just tell us to worship Him, but He actually lays down for us specifically in the New Testament, how to worship Him. The better informed we are of the Scriptures - i.e. of the truth - the better able we will be to enter into worship.

One thing I would encourage you to do, if you want to learn how to worship God more in private and in public, is to saturate yourself with the word of God. Eat up passages like Genesis 1 or Psalm 139: 'Lord, thou hast searched me and known me'; Psalm 23 'The Lord is my shepherd'; John 7; John 17; Romans 1 through to 3; Revelation chapter 19 - passages that are saturated with praise and worship of God. When we fill ourselves with God's truth, it will overflow! I used to think at times that God was worshipped in some mystical type of vacuum, that you just sat and waited on God, and thought about and contemplated God in yourself, and somehow you would sense God round about you. God does not reveal Himself independent of His revelation, God has revealed Himself in His word, in the written word, in the incarnate Word. If you want to get to know God, if you want to know what He's like in order to worship Him, get into the word - for there you will worship Him in truth.

What does it mean to worship in spirit?

What does it mean to worship Him in spirit? Well, carnal men are content with the act of worship, like the Pharisees, the outward form of prayer, alms-giving and fasting - and yet they have no internal desire for communion with God. I'm talking about really

knowing God. That is why the Lord Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites: the outward form, but no inward reality. Stephen Charnock, the puritan, put it like this: 'Without the heart it is no worship, it is a stage-play, it is an acting a part without being that person really, it is a playing the hypocrite'. Another put it like this: 'To worship God in spirit is to worship Him from the inside out'. Has your worship just been external? Has it been true worship, according to God's word? Both in the God that you're, in your spirit, coming to and prostrating yourself before; and in your act: is it truthful as you practise your worship? Is it in spirit? You could have everything truthful in the external, but not be worshipping God from the inside out. Our worship must be according to spirit and according to truth.

When do we worship?

Now let's ask a second question: when do we worship? Someone has said: 'If you worship on Sunday, what do you do on Monday?' - that's a good question. But the question that precedes that, I would say, is: what do you even do on Sunday? Do you worship God even on the Lord's Day? The old story is told about the man who dreamed an angel escorted him to church, and there he saw the organist and the pianist playing vigorously, the choir singing and musicians playing their instruments with great gusto - but the man never heard a sound. He turned to his angelic escort, after seeing the congregation singing but hearing no sound, seeing the minister rise to speak but his speech muted as his lips moved - no volume at all. In amazement he said to the angel: 'What's the reason for this? What's the explanation of not hearing a thing?', and the angel just replied: 'Well, that's the way it sounds to us in heaven' - that's the way it sounds to us in heaven. 'You hear nothing because there is nothing to hear. These are people engaged in the form of worship, but their thoughts are on other things, their hearts are far away'.

I'm just asking the question of myself and of you today, as we consider worship: how do we sing these great hymns? Do we mouth them, perhaps because we've memorised them, but does our heart enter into the truths of them? How do we pray? How do I preach? How do you listen? Is it in a worshipful attitude? J.C. Ryle, that Bishop of Liverpool, put it like this: 'We must take our whole heart to the house of God, and worship and hear like those who listen to the reading of a will'. Sometimes we pay as much attention to the hymns and to the prayers as the little boy who thought the gospel refrain 'Gladly the cross I bear' was about a bear with cross-eyes, 'Gladly the cross-eyed bear'. The fact of the matter is, God's word says: 'I will sing with spirit, and I will sing with understanding also' - worship with understanding and with spirit. Do we do that? I'm not talking about emotion now, and our emotions should enter into it surely, but that is not what spiritual worship is. Singing is not worship, shouting is not worship, but we can worship in our singing, we can worship in our shouting - worship is in the spirit.