

The “In-sides” of Worship

John 4:19–24

What are you doing here? Or to put it a bit more classically, what is your chief end? Isaiah 43:6–7 tells us we are made to glorify God, and Psalm 16 tells us that we are to enjoy through the pleasure of nearness to him, communion with him. Hence the catechism’s answer: *The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever*. Worship of our Creator should at its broadest sense include “glorify” and enjoy. Since all things were created by God, through God, and for God, all created things, with man as the crown of creation, are made for worship — hardwired by God to worship. And so we **will** worship. The only question is **what** will be the object of our worship. To put it a bit more popularly, in the words of Bob Dylan: *Gotta serve somebody*.

As the fall into sin produced comprehensive corruption, worship has been corrupted. We can’t escape **that** we will worship, but our rebellious nature warps **what** and **who** we will worship. Rather than worship God, who is blessed forever, we are bent to worship and serve the creature instead. We exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. We are going to do a breakout section on worship as we continue in John 4 and learn how Jesus instructs and recovers worship. It is important that we know this, as worship will be the eternal employment of those who have entered into Christ through faith. This short, direct teaching is packed with meaning. Let’s stand and read the text. **John 4:19–24** — 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. 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.”

PRAY

To begin, my understanding of worship, including this passage, is significantly shaped by Dr Bruce Leafblad, retired professor of worship at Southwestern Seminary. I’m not preaching his sermon, but I have been so impacted by his scholarship and passion that almost anything that I say on the subject requires a credit and “thank you” to him for his scholarship and capacity to communicate biblical truth.

Now, you recall from last week that in the encounter, Jesus has spoken God's truth to her, and it has exposed her immorality. The plain reading of the text suggests that rather than deal with her now exposed sin and shame, she deflects to keep from dealing with the sin issue, and goes to another religious subject, a popular debate subject in the culture. Let's not talk about my private life. Let's talk about this debate on worship. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain. She goes all the way back to the dispute between the southern and northern tribes, or maybe further.

Deuteronomy 12 established that sacrifices and worship were to occur at "a place that the Lord will choose." At first it is Shiloh, then moved to Jerusalem in the south under David. Two generations after David, Jeroboam led a rebellion. He hired counterfeit priests to conduct worship in the north. The Assyrians later blended their pagan religion with the already corrupted Judaism of the north, and set up Samaritan worship. When she says "our fathers," is she referring to Jeroboam? Or the Samaritans? Or even further back to Abraham? It's been a hodgepodge of confusion. No wonder Jesus says, "You worship what you do not know." Let's walk through his response.

Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. True worship is moving from temples made with men's hands to a new heart given by God. It's not geography but communion around God's table with his people. You may have heard people say they can worship God anywhere they want. They don't have to be in church. That's a half-truth that will lead to a whole error. We don't have to go to Jerusalem to sacrifice. But the covenant people of God are to worship together. It doesn't have to be in a particular building, but we are to be together. A boat on the lake is not the gathered people of God in worship, and we are directly instructed not to forsake the assembly of believers. Sincere ideas and clever notions for worship are not worship, and they don't fulfill the commands of Scripture.

Further, Jews and Samaritans are no longer separated by geography. The people of God from every tribe, language, people, and nation are gathering together in worship. No more ethnic or cultural or political walls of division among God's people. We are all one united in Christ, and we all have the same assignment to glorify him and enjoy him forever, and together.

Salvation is of the Jews. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the promise given to God's covenant people. That's what he means by "We worship what we know." It is written in God's word; it is truth. The Messiah will bring salvation not only to the Jews, but open the wells of salvation to flow to the nations

that the whole earth may be glad and the people from distant coastlands will rejoice and glorify God. It is not through the Samaritans and their hodgepodge. It is not through anyone else that doesn't like the Jews, and so formulates some sincere notion of how they may gain God's approval. Sincere motives have nothing to do with it. It is God carrying out his covenant promise— any attempt to edit, rework, alter, "improve" the worship he prescribes is incredible hubris and pride. And we see it by the boatload in our day.

Just this past week a woman occupying the office of pastor at a church in Texas where the US Senate candidate Talarico attends said that she did not even know if Jesus ever existed. But she wants to have a place where people can be welcomed and worship, however they choose. She, and they, worship what they do not know. And it will be of no help at all, but only heap up wrath on the Great Day, because she has rejected the truth of God's word.

Now is the time of true worship. The hour is coming and is now here. It has not been here before now. Worship that was premised on the sacrificial system was prescribed by God, but it was only a shadow of what was to come. It was not the finished product, if you will. Sacrifices had to be repeatedly made that could not take away sin, but only remind them. Worship at its core is communion with God — it is the Table of communion with God that existed before the fall. But to this point, rather than communion and nearness, a thick veil separates. True worship is arriving with the Messiah as he ushers in God's kingdom on earth. Jesus's hour is coming, and his plan of redemption is in process. Along with his hour comes true worship and the restoration of communion when the veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom. ***We are in the time of true worship.***

True worshipers worship the father in Spirit and in truth. God is the object of worship. There are at least four categories of worship.

- **There is false worship.** The worship of a false god in an unprescribed way. ***Wrong God, wrong way.*** This is idol worship. We could go to any number of examples, but consider Elijah in 1 Kings 18 as the priests of Baal cry out to a false god all day. He doesn't answer because he is not there. As an element of this false worship, they cut themselves and defile and destroy the body God gave them for use as an instrument of worship. ***Wrong God, wrong way.***
- **There is Cain worship.** In Genesis 4, Cain brings an offering to Yahweh. ***Right God!*** But God does not accept his offering. We are not given an abundance of details, but adding Hebrews 11,

we know that Cain's brother, Abel, did bring an acceptable offering, so we know there was understanding of what should be, and Cain made it up as he went. **Right God; Wrong way.**

- **There is vain worship. Right God; Right Way; wrong heart.** Matthew 15 records another confrontation with the religious leaders, the Pharisees. The Pharisees are experts in the law, being meticulous about it. They come to the right God, Yahweh. They come carefully in all the ways prescribed in the law. What does Jesus say about this? You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me..." **Their heart is far from me.** Their affections are not for me. They love their sin; their self-righteousness. Their hearts are not converted. They are worshiping the right God in the right way with the wrong heart. They worship me in vain. And so it is vain for anyone to jump through hoops without love, and without a new heart to glorify God and be satisfied in him. **Wrong heart = vain worship.**
- **There is true worship. Right God. Right Way. Right Heart.** Worship that God accepts comes from a new heart that God has given to love him. An unconverted person can go through all the trappings of worship in a Christian church that is doing everything right – but unless the heart of stone that loves sin has been removed and a heart of flesh that loves God has been given in its place. That person enters that worship service with a fist still raised to God in rebellion, and a heart that still loves what brings death and defies the saving work of Christ. But for all who believe, for all who call on his name, he makes them children of God, giving them a new heart that loves to sit at the table of communion with their God.

Now he teases out further what true worship looks like. It is in spirit and in truth.

In spirit deals further with the issue of being given a new heart. The old heart apart from Christ is dead in sins and trespasses. That is spiritual death. A dead person can do nothing, including worship. Worship services that are designed to attract unbelievers are not worship at all. They may be evangelistic. They may be entertaining. They may be an attempt to present Christ. But urging the unconverted, and those whose hearts remain in rebellion against God to worship him is silly, to put it in the most charitable terms. Those who worship must worship in their spirit made alive by God.

So "in spirit" also introduces the essential nature of the Holy Spirit. He is the prompter in worship. He is the one who instructs and leads what is going on. What we do is not done in the power of the flesh. Or if it is, it has no life in it at all. This is why we plead for the help of the Holy Spirit and his leadership. What is true of the whole Christian life is true of worship: the Spirit must give it life. The

Resurrection power of the Spirit must be at work on us if we are to make progress in Christlikeness — so it is in worship.

We must worship in spirit and in *truth* — the truth of all that God reveals about himself.

The word ***truth*** is thrown around in a bizarre way in our generation. But truth is fixed. It is not my truth or your truth. It's just truth. Truth is found in a person as we have memorized in our "I Am" statements. Who is the truth? Jesus is the truth. He is the incarnate word and he has revealed the truth of who he is, and the truth of all things in his word. Therefore worship that does not have the word of God as a central aspect in it is very likely to go into error. You recall the words of Paul to his disciple Timothy in **1 Timothy 4** — devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Scripture reading is to be part of worship. Several years ago on a trip to Texas I visited a very large church. Several thousand people were there. It won't surprise you that I was tuned into how much scripture was incorporated in the service. On the morning that I attended exactly 1/2 of one verse was read. The preacher read it as he began his sermon. No other scripture was read. No Call to Worship. No scripture-guided prayer. No benediction. The people walked out oriented to what their ministers thought about things, but not oriented to what God said about them. We must worship according to truth. The Word of God must be front and center.

The scripture is God's special revelation of himself. When we read the Scripture, we are centered on the truth of who God is, all of his attributes, all of his commands, all of his promises, all of his instructions. In worship, we hear ***thou shall not***, and ***thou shalt***.

Preeminent in worship and a first priority in our understanding of who God ***is***, is that he is holy. Every time God allows a window to be opened so that we can look into the throne room and see the worship that is occurring there, which we are headed toward because of Christ, what is it that we hear before we hear anything else? ***Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty***. We must lay hold of this. If we do not, even our good intentions become Uzzah's presumptuous hand stretching out to touch the holy things with no awareness of who God is. We must worship in all the truth of who God is as revealed by scripture.

As we must believe and be oriented to who God is, we must believe and be oriented to who we are. God says we are sinful at the core, rebels and stiff-necked. People with hearts hardened toward God in rebellion. We are in desperate need of a Savior. We have no standing before this Holy God

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through any work, or effort, or notion of our own, no matter how sincere or how diligent. Some deliberately ignore man's sinfulness and worship because they neither know the truth of God, nor the truth of themselves. Joel Osteen is such a false teacher, and deliberately organizes his service not to include mentions of sin. He doesn't want to bring the room down. He wants everyone encouraged. If you're a goat on the road to hell some encouragement might make you feel better for a minute, but will do nothing to turn you from Hell or set you on the narrow road to God's kingdom. It is depressing in a sense to hear that what your heart loves, and what your mind embraces is unrighteous, morally depraved, and sinful. But we must know this, and we must come to grips with the fact that the wages of sin is death. That is truth, and we must understand that before we can worship God all right.

But when Jesus says we must worship in spirit and in truth, it is not merely the truth of our sinfulness, it is also the truth of all that he has done to rescue sinners from their condemnation that produces eternal death. So we also worship in the truth **that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**. We worship in the truth that **he who knew no sin became sin so that we would be the righteousness of God**. We worship in the truth that **though our sins were as scarlet, they are now white as snow** because Christ's blood washes clean. We worship in the truth, that though we once held our fist defiantly in God's face and were hostile combatants against God – a battle which we could never win – Jesus Christ has made peace through his blood shed on the cross. We enter that state of peace and righteousness with God *through* our Savior, Jesus Christ. We enter by faith. That is the truth of grace. We cannot achieve it on our own. We must trust and believe that he purchased this for us as he went to the cross to atone for our sins.

All of this is wonderful news, but even more wonderful, even more soul stirring is this: the father is seeking those who will worship him in this way. The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost and he has come in order to make them worshipers. He seeks sinners to save them to bring them to the Telios, the ultimate goal of being brought back to the table of Communion at which we glorify God and enjoy him forever.

That is the inside of worship. Not a mountain. Not a building. Not sincerity. The Father seeks people who come to Him in a living spirit, by the truth of His Word, through the Son who is standing at the well. You are made to glorify Him and enjoy Him. He brings us back to the table. Come, and worship.

PRAY