

Lord, teach us to Worship Part 1: What is Worship?

I had planned on preaching this series a while back and figured it might come soon after I taught on Prayer, but hearing what my friend Oliver Lewis was going to speak on last week, "Unleashing the Power of Praise," I knew that would be the perfect segue into this series.

This is a tricky one, because just like we've mentioned with other words and phrases in the Bible, if you ask 100 different people for the definition of a certain word or phrase, you are likely to get 100 different answers; and it is just as true for Worship.

What is worship? What does it mean *to* worship? Does the Bible prescribe *how* to worship?

I'd like for us to get into the Scriptures over the next few weeks to answer these questions, because I believe it is very important that we align ourselves with God's Word in these matters.

I think many of us would like to think and describe what we do at church, at home and even in our cars and other places as worship... but is it? Worship is certainly not confined to Christianity (our form of worship started with prescribed methods in Judaism), but there are all kinds of religions that would claim that they participate in worship, other gods, of course. What does the word "worship" actually mean?

The general definition of the word 'worship' is: Adoration, honor and/or reverence; a religious service or ceremony. The word origin comes from the old English word: Worth-Ship. It denotes something of high value or that which you give highest value to.

We call our services: worship services and again, that may be true in the generic or general sense, as a corporate setting, but are we individually and corporately *actually engaging* in true worship?

It sounds like a rhetorical question, but what we may fail to fully understand is that the Bible, and specifically Jesus gave us a specific definition of worship from God's perspective:

In **John 4**, Jesus's famous encounter with the 'woman at the well' we get this conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman: ***"The woman *said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Jesus *said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."*** (v.19-24)

Their discussion revolves around worship and the place and style of worship and Jesus, even though acknowledging the role that the Jews had in keeping aligned with the only true God,

Yahweh, hangs a hard left; and instead of calling her back to her heritage and roots, He makes a distinction between worshippers and TRUE worshippers. He tells her that the Father is seeking true worshippers, who will worship Him in Spirit and in truth. He not only makes this distinction, but He declares that the Father *must be* worshipped in this manner.

Just as Jesus had done with the Pharisees over the commandments of God, where He said, there is something deeper than just breaking the commandments outwardly, but understanding that the root and source of the outward behavior is from our breaking the commandments *inwardly* (“You have heard it said, ‘Do not murder, but I tell you if you hate someone in your heart, you are guilty of murder.’”)

Here, He is similarly making a distinction: outward worship is one thing (form; truth), inward worship is quite another (worshipping in the Spirit). He consistently brought this to the Pharisees attention in the Gospels, often quoting Old Testament passages:

“Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote...” -Isaiah 29:13

Jesus was saying you are doing all the right outward things, but not from a good, truthful, spiritual, inward motivation. In short, He was saying you are going through the motions... you are doing what you have been taught to do, “tradition,” not that which comes from a genuine true connection and response to the One whom you are supposed to worship.

You see, in almost every other religion, man initiates worship and the gods are supposed to respond. They build an altar or shrine or leave sacrifices (including food and money) and they do this so that their gods will respond favorably to them: a good harvest, good weather, fertility, etc. Man initiates, the gods respond.

But not so with Judaism and Christianity: God initiates and we respond. God reveals and we choose to worship or not worship. He pursues us and hopes we will in turn pursue Him. God says, ‘Build an altar’ and we build an altar. God says, ‘Offer a sacrifice’ and we offer a sacrifice. God shows up and we bow down. We see how this plays out for us in **Romans 1**:

“...because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.”
-Romans 1:19-21

Whenever God reveals Himself, it requires a proper Biblical and spiritual response. If we don’t respond in the way He prescribes (true worship in the Spirit), our hearts become hardened.

With each layer of hardness (like the layers of an onion), it becomes harder to recognize Him and to hear Him and respond to Him. For example, in relationship to this Scripture in **Romans 1**, when you see God in nature, but you stop responding to Him as Creator and Designer and stop honoring Him and giving thanks, your heart becomes hardened. Every time you see a beautiful sunset or a rainbow or a picturesque view in Creation, you should respond to that revelation of God (**Psalm 19:1**).

Of course, as beings created with freewill, we can initiate worship, with an understanding that God is always drawing us to Himself, wooing us to Himself... Jesus said

"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him..." -John 6:44a

But in any given moment, we can choose to worship Him. What is that called? A sacrifice. What does it look like? The very first mention of the word worship (although we see many instances of sacrifice in the Bible before this) is in the story of Abraham and Isaac. *First mentions* in the Bible are very important. It typically lays foundations for what we find later in Scripture of whatever is first mentioned.

You know the story: God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, his *only* son Isaac. This was God's promised child to Abraham and Sarah; his child that would be Abraham's path to becoming the 'Father of many Nations...' Why would God ask for this? How could God ask for this? Let's read to find out:

"Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." So, Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." (Emphasis mine) Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So, the two of them walked on together. Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So, the two of them walked on together.

Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." Then

Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide [Jehovah Jireh], as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided."

Then the angel of the LORD [Jesus] called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." -Genesis 22:1-18

Of course, the greatest act of worship we can give to God is to be obedient to Him, like Abraham. God is looking for our yes to Him; but he's also looking for our best for Him. He wants both, but the order is important. To be obedient, we must know what He is asking us to obey Him in: the commands in His Word; the still small voice of His Spirit; the prompting and leading of His Spirit... Like Abraham, we must be willing to give God our yes and our best.

"Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams."
-1st Samuel 15:22

The problem we often face, is that we look to offer religious sacrifices to God, apart from our obedience or the sacrifices He is looking for. Remember, God has prepared "good works" for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). Let's use this as an example: You are harboring unforgiveness towards someone, but you want God to be pleased with something you did for Him. Is He pleased with your "sacrifice?" What does Scripture tell us:

"Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." -Matthew 5:23, 24

Obedience before sacrifice. If God will accept sacrifices, what kind of sacrifices is He looking for? First and foremost: a sacrifice of Praise.

"Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." -Hebrews 13:15

Did you know that there are 7 words in the Hebrew that all get translated "praise" in our Bible? And they all mean different things? We will look at those later in this series. There are over 50 different expressions of praise and worship in the Scriptures, yet many church cultures are uncomfortable with most of them in a "worship" service...

What other sacrifices might God be pleased with?

-Self-sacrifice. As I mentioned before, we serve God by serving others. Anytime you 'die to self' and put the interest of another above your own, it's a pleasing sacrifice.

-A sacrifice that costs you something. King David sinned greatly before the Lord by taking a census of the people and the result was a plague that broke out in Israel. David went to the house of Araunah the Jebusite to buy his threshing floor to offer a burnt offering to the Lord, so perhaps the plague could be stopped. He offered to buy the threshing floor and Araunah told the King he'd give it to him for free; after all, he's the King. But David refused, saying:

"No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." -2nd Samuel 24:24

Does your worship cost you something? Remember when Jesus praised the widow who gave her two mites? He said, "They [the Rich] gave out of their abundance... but she gave *everything* she owned."

How about Mary when she anointed the feet of Jesus with a pound of nard, a very expensive perfume? The cost was equivalent to a year's wages! What do you make in a year? Would you be willing to sacrifice it for Jesus? Does your worship cost you anything? We are commanded to "love the Lord our God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength." Are you willing to love Him, through worship, with all of you? Or just some of you? What if your sacrifice of praise cost you your dignity?

David danced before the Ark of the Covenant as he escorted it back to Jerusalem. He offered sacrifices to the Lord and burnt offerings many times along the road; but then, he did something very un-Kingly (at least by onlookers): David stripped down to a linen ephod (basically undergarments) and danced before the Lord as the people worshipped God. Remember the Ark represented the presence of God. They continued to worship and offer more sacrifices til the Ark reached the Tabernacle.

But not everyone was happy with David dancing. David's first wife, Michal, "despised him in her heart" because of his actions. But David told her, "I danced before the Lord... and I will become even more undignified than this..."

What if your worship had to cost you your pride or your dignity? Would you offer it before the Lord? Do you care more about what people around you think... more than what God thinks? God is looking for true worshippers, who will worship Him in Spirit AND in truth.

