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A Definition of Worship

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If you were to take a survey and ask those you were surveying to define the meaning of worship, you would undoubtedly receive a number of different answers. In cases where such diversity in opinions abound, it is refreshing to open the scriptures to discover God's perspective. It is to that end that this message is addressed. This will be done by considering the encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well in John 4.

This passage is found in the context of Jesus leaving Jerusalem to go to Galilee. On the way, he travelled through an area of the country that was socially and politically off limits, the region of Samaria. The people of this region, the Samaritans, were a mixed race of Jews who had intermarried with gentiles. As a result of intermarriage, they had their own form of worship, a religious syncretism. Between the Jews and the Samaritans, there existed a mutual animosity.

While passing through Samaria, Jesus stopped at a well. There he met a woman who was drawing water. He struck up a conversation with her, which to her was a great surprise. Typically, a Jew would have nothing to do with a Samaritan. Tremendous bitterness existed between the two groups of people.

Nevertheless, Jesus began to converse with her. He asked her to draw some water out of the well for him. This surprised her. I don't think she was being sarcastic when she said, "How is it that you ask me for a drink?" In other words, this was quite unconventional, quite new, simply never done, that a Jew would ask a Samaritan woman for a drink.

Thus began a most interesting conversation. In the course of the dialogue, Jesus mentioned to her that he had a gift: a resource for water that would not only satisfy her physical thirst, but would satisfy the inner thirst of her soul. She would no longer need to be dependent upon the physical for satisfaction.

Naturally, this interested her. Her response might be paraphrased, "Well, okay. If you have special relationships, a new religious experience that might really make my life more pleasurable, I am interested." Before proceeding, however, to talk to her about the benefits of true worship, he asked a very penetrating question. Essentially, he was saying, "Before we can go further with this discussion about living water and a gift from God, I want you to go call your husband." If you are unfamiliar with the story, that makes little sense. Here Jesus raised a question concerning that part of her life where the real answer would need to be applied, for that identified the real problem: the private part of her life. Her response of course was, "I don't have a husband right now." Jesus replied, "You have spoken correctly, although evasively. You have had five. And the man you are living with now is not your husband." This obviously could have concluded the conversation. It did not get light and pithy after this, but rather tense. Nevertheless, it took the conversation exactly where it needed to go, for suddenly she realized the person she was talking to knew her.

From this point on, Jesus began to talk about her relationship with God. Whenever you talk about your relationship with God, worship comes up, or at least a place of worship. This happens frequently in witnessing. You may be speaking about heaven and hell, and the response very often is, "Well, I go to church," or, "I grew up in this church . . . I have a denomination . . . I have a religious tradition. I have a form of

worship." Consequently, the conversation may easily degenerate into a discussion of the different forms of worship. "We worship in this mountain as Samaritans; and, Jews, you worship in Jerusalem." "We simply have different points of view about worship." And so she responded as most people respond when we begin to talk about worship. Thus, there was an immediate clash over worship. In her mind it was a clash of place; it was a clash of denomination; it was a clash of which church. In the heart and mind of Jesus, it was a completely different clash. It was a clash between the outside and the inside; mere ritual and the heart. So he continued to address the issue of worship. Worship, even for those of us who know Christ as Savior and love the Word of God, can be easily misunderstood. For example, if you were to ask a group of believers, "Do you worship?" or, "What is worship?" almost without exception, many would reply, "I come to church. Of course I worship God! I am here in church." All too often, worship is used to refer to a place. This misconception must be corrected.

In contemporary Christianity, there are many different views of what worship ought to be. Even with a local church family there are disagreements. Some prefer, for instance, a service to be a little more "lively." Others opt for a service a little less lively. Even in a congregation where all agree that the Bible is the Word of God and that Jesus is the Son of God, there exist different notions about what worship really is and what it ought to be. Often the discussion is a misguided one, for it frequently refers to the place of worship. Other times it is about traditions and rituals: things we do. Of course these topics are important, and they are a part of worship. Nevertheless, when we begin dealing with the outside, we are approaching the issue the wrong way, for we are working from the outside in. Jesus works from the inside out.

The word for worship that appears several times in the text is the word most often used in the New Testament. It literally means to fall down before another. The Old Testament words imply a similar meaning: to prostrate oneself on the ground before another, to give obeisance to, to revere. This definition

is not disputed; however, it does little to dispel the confusion about what constitutes authentic worship. It is this consideration that is being addressed today. Let us consider Christ's response to the topic. One might think worship would not be a relevant topic at this point in the conversation. Jesus thought so, and he immediately found himself in a discussion about the *place* of worship. He had now created the occasion to instruct her as to the meaning of true worship in the eyes of God. What really is important to God? We all should agree that what really is important is not what we think worship is, but what God says it is.

The Misconception of True Worship

How is worship defined, seen, and valued by Christ himself? First, Jesus clarified the misconceptions on the part of the woman by a statement of false worship. At first, water was the topic of conversation. Obviously, she was talking about water from the well. Jesus spoke of living water that will give her eternal life. Although they used the same words, they were worlds apart. Then Jesus proceeded to talk to her about her notions of worship. Though he was frank, he was not spiteful. He declared to her that her thinking was inaccurate. He did not do this to win an argument, but to help her understand and come to experience true worship. It was for her benefit: her well-being. It is always to our benefit, as well as to God's glory, that we worship God his way and not our own.

False Worship is Characterized by Externalism

Christ made two very important observations about false or faulty worship. False worship is marked by externalism. It is tied to a specific place, a specific location which is associated with a specific set of practices. Consequently, there is this argument: is it this mountain or that mountain? This house of

worship or that house of worship? Worship is tied to certain activities, traditional activities that happen at a particular place. There is traditional worship and there is non-traditional worship. Some like traditional worship, while others prefer non-traditional worship. Actually, the latter is a misnomer, for everybody practices their tradition. It is the way they seek to do it. Therefore, you may have a service characterized by serious formal ritual (i.e. "traditional" worship), or a service characterized by a lot of hooting and hollering: the enthusiastic kind of service we would call non-traditional. In such cases, the hooting and hollering would be the tradition. In the former case, the serious, formalism is the tradition. Therefore, the question really is not is it traditional or non-traditional; rather, the misconception is that worship is limited to the way you do things: the place that you worship and the way you worship, rather than the way you live.

What is interesting about the Samaritan woman is that she was able to have worship; that is, to be a religious person and still maintain a life of immorality. It is obvious to us that something was wrong with her worship, because she could live an immoral life and still be a faithful worshiper. How can these two co-exist? This does not seem to be appropriate. Something is wrong with this picture. She is a worshiper; yet she is known by every man in town for her immorality. How can this be? The answer is that false worship always allows one to feel right with God, because of going through certain motions. I go to a certain place, and I do certain things; therefore, I am afforded to disregard what he wants in some part of my heart or my life.

Consider King Saul, for instance. King Saul was encountered by the prophet Samuel after his campaign with the Amalekites. He had been commanded by God to destroy everything and everyone. He was to take none of it for himself, and every person who was in that army was to be destroyed. King Saul failed to do this. He kept some of the good things for himself including the Amalekite king as well as some of the better livestock.

When Samuel arrived, the king approached him claiming to have done God's will. Samuel then posed a question that disclosed Saul's sin. "If you killed all the sheep, why do I hear sheep? What is the meaning of the bleating of the sheep in my ears?" Dead sheep make no noise. There was an inconsistency here. King Saul's worship lacked integrity. He felt right with God, because he did obey the Lord--partially; nevertheless, there was a part of his life where he was directly disobedient. As a result, Samuel's confrontation reminded him that God's greatest pleasure is not merely going through the externals of offering a lamb on an altar. God's concern was obedience in the heart.

Of course it was right for Old Testament believers to offer sacrifices to God. In Saul's case, however, this external act was merely a substitution for what God had commanded. Saul refused God's will, and thus he sought to appease God by offering sacrifices. Samuel reminded him that God prefers obedience to that kind of sacrifice. The real believer in the Old Testament brought a lamb to the altar, which was something God told him to do. They were to provide a sacrifice, a blood sacrifice for their sins and the sins of the people. It was something the king was supposed to do. But the problem here was that he thought just going through the motions of bringing the sheep made him right with God. He failed to understand that what God preferred more than the sheep was obedience in the heart. Thus Samuel's rebuke: to obey is better than to sacrifice. "I would rather have you obey me than bring me a gift," was what God was saying. And so there was a discrepancy there, a duplicity. His actions were not a reflection of his inner life: his heart.

The Samaritan woman committed a similar discrepancy in her worship. There were two levels: the externals gave the appearance of obeying God; the practice of her life was to disregard the will of God.

The Pharisees provide another illustration of compartmentalizing worship from their private lives. The Pharisees did a lot of right things. Their carefulness in keeping the law was commendable. Since they were very serious about

obeying every jot and tittle of the Mosaic law, they developed a system of behavior that made them separate and unique. The problem was that they were dependent on merely an external obedience to God. They forgot the internal obedience to the Word of God. Consequently, they were called whited sepulchers. They were cups that were clean on the outside, but dirty on the inside.¹ But this was the problem. These same Pharisees, who kept the law down to the last jot, paid liars and paid blood money to betray the Messiah of God. They murdered the Messiah. There was something terribly incongruous here. Religious people were plotting a murder. Their behavior was incompatible with their profession. Why? Because their worship was a faulty worship. It allowed them to feel good about their relationship with God, because they had gone through some external rituals without their worship ever touching the very heart and soul of their lives.

You may be able to see inconsistency so clearly in the lives of others, but how about your own life? "Well, Pastor, I go to this church. Is it not a good church?" Yes. "Well, don't we preach the truth here?" Yes. "Well, don't we worship Christ here to the best of our ability like He wants to be worshiped?" We endeavor to. "Well, how can you say I am involved in false worship?" The place is not the problem. The problem is that you have false worship if the worship, the belief, the doctrine does not affect your private life.

You have false worship, men, if you can come here and go through the motions of loving God, while at home you are not loving your wife. It is just as inconsistent to come to God's house, say I am loving God, and then go home and not love your wife, as it was for the woman at the well to say I have a place of worship, while living in immorality. There is a difference in degree, but not in kind. False worship allows me a private life

¹It is interesting that Jesus never condemned them for being clean on the outside, only for not being in their private lives what they appeared to be in their public lives.

that is not touched by what I say I believe. False worship is characterized by an externalism where you can argue, you can fight, you can write, you can be the paragon of doctrinal purity, and yet cheat in business. In so doing, you are merely playing a little game, a little mind game where you think you do not actually break the law, but in fact, you do; and you think that you are still a true worshiper of God? If your professing beliefs and activities of worship do not touch what you do in the private part of your life, you have a false kind of worship.

True worship must begin within. It must be true within our hearts first, then it is ready to be expressed without. The outside is important, but it is to be the by-product, the result of one's true integrity and love for God. Therefore, our form of worship may be true: we do not bow down and kiss idols; we do not go through all kinds of rituals and then go out and live in immorality all week; nevertheless, we may still be guilty of false worship. Having the opportunity to worship God does not mean that you are personally involved in the acts of true worship, for your worship can also be marked by mere externalism. When what you say, what you sing, what you say "amen" to, and what you insist is believed in your church is not reflected in your private life, your worship is characterized by duplicity.

False Worship is Characterized by Ignorance

From this passage we not only see that false worship is marked by externalism, but also that false worship is marked by ignorance. One problem with the Samaritan woman was that she associated worship primarily with a place, and as is evident in the passage, it had not affected her life. Christ identified a second problem: "Ye worship ye know not what." In other words, she did not know the God she claimed to worship. She placed such emphasis upon the place that she neglected the person she was supposed to worship. This ignorance upon the part of the Samaritans was willful, for they did not accept all of the scriptures to be true. They believed things about God that

they wanted to believe. They refused to believe those things about God that they did not want to believe. As a result, the Samaritans, as a religious group, accepted only the first five books of the Bible, the writings of Moses, as being true. They rejected the rest of the scriptures. So they went to the law, but they would not consult all of Scripture. They were willfully ignorant, worshiping God as they wanted him to be, not God for who he is. Because it made them uncomfortable, they simply rejected those portions of Scripture which revealed God and his will.

Believers in Jesus Christ may do the same thing. We can be selective and choose to adhere to those areas of God's word that we happen to like. It is possible for us to esteem certain doctrines to the neglect of others. If we only esteem the holiness of God, that is the only doctrine we will talk about. If we major on the love of God to the exclusion of God's other attributes, then that is the only one we will speak of. If it is his justice we consider, then that alone will concern us. God, however, is not merely any one of those attributes. He is all of them combined. We must worship God as he is, not as we want him to be. The problem with the Samaritan woman was that she did not even know this God. This idea of really knowing him personally and intimately in a private relationship was absolutely foreign to her. That is why most worship going on today all over the world is false worship, because there are people worshipping a God they do not even know. You cannot worship God in any true way until you come to know him through Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.

Now some assume that if a person accepts Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, he is automatically a true worshiper. This, however, is a wrong assumption. Having accepted Jesus Christ as one's personal Savior does not automatically make one holy and Spirit-filled. Rather, one *can* be. Before coming to know Christ, no one was able to be holy. Upon knowing Christ, it is possible. Now suppose I have come to know Christ, but I am not focused on knowing him. I then am practicing faulty worship. We get caught up in the process and lose the person.

It can happen. It certainly happens in mainline Christian churches where people are not even told they need a personal relationship with Christ. Years ago in college, I remember being impressed by this when I went to hear a presentation of Verdi's *Requiem*. It was performed in Latin, but the program provided an English translation. I can remember sitting there and listening when all of a sudden I thought, "If they only knew what they were singing." This was the gospel! This was the truth! The Son of God died on the cross for the sins of men and then rose from the dead! They went through all the motions of worship, and they probably felt good about God. But did they really know him about whom they were singing? Thousands of people were present. They came, they heard, they left, and did they ever once think about Jesus? What a tragedy it would be to sing two or three hours about Jesus without ever thinking of him once.

This same thing can happen to you and me. Have you ever done that? I have. It is really easy to get caught up in the motions. Take communion, for instance. You can go through the Lord's Supper without thinking about him. When we do, we are participating in a faulty worship. Even though the event is based on truth, it is faulty or false, because it is merely external and ignorant of God.

The Character of True Worship

In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Christ next focused on the characteristics of true worship. We have learned what wrong worship is. Now we can learn from this passage what true worship is. What are the characteristics of true worship? Three principles will be given concerning true or genuine worship. There are many more--but there are three that Jesus addressed here.

God Deserves True Worship

True worship is deserved by the Father. It is something that God deserves because he is, first of all, God the Father. This is a very descriptive term. As Father, he is the creator, he is the sustainer. Moreover, he possesses full authority. Whether you like it or not, the universe is not a matriarchy, but a patriarchy. The Father rules this universe. He made you. Consequently, you are accountable to him. He gave you life and even sustains that life. Because he is the Father, because He is the creator, because he is God, he deserves our worship. Another reason God deserves our worship is because of the gift of salvation. Christ went on to say, "Ye worship ye know not what." The salvation of God comes through the Jewish nation (v. 22). It has been made available to us, the gentiles. He has provided us with means to be forgiven of every sin; we have the potential now to have eternal life. Messiah came from the seed of David. Now all nations may come to saving faith in Christ. Because of that, God deserves to be worshiped.

An important implication of the fact that God deserves our worship is that true worship focuses on the one worshiped. One of the biggest problems in the contemporary flurry about worship is the overemphasis upon what worship does for *us*, how worship makes *us* feel. The truth is worship does affect how we feel and what we do. There are benefits to true worship. But if the benefits of worship and the feelings of worship become the focus, we have a faulty worship. Worship is deserved by God, not by you and me. Worship is not something we deserve, it is the grace and privilege of God. That the God we have sinned against, rebelled against, and have been ignorant of allows us to bring gifts to him and love him and worship him is a privilege! He deserves our worship as God. This is the reason we come together to worship.

So why do you worship? To get something out of it? I am not trying to be mean. That is the natural man's response. To be honest with you, when I am just operating on a normal basis and not thinking about it and someone asks me, "Why did

you go to church?" I am inclined to say, "To get something out of it." When we worship with this motive, we are not focusing upon God, but upon self; for coming together is primarily not about our "getting something out of it." The reason we come together to worship is so that *God* gets something out of it. If God gets something out of it, we will too; but the reason we come together is because of God.

"Well, I don't know whether I really care to go to church." That is not the point. "Well, I don't know if I enjoy that." That is not the point. The point is God. Does God want me to go? Will God be pleased? The question is will he be glorified, not will I like it. It is not important that we like everything that goes on around here, is it? It is important, however, that God does. So there are parts of ministry and worship that we do not particularly like. What is important is, does God like it? Does this bring God honor, respect, love, praise, or thanksgiving? If God is getting what he deserves from our worship, then our worship is successful. It is deserved by the Father.

God Desires Our Worship

Not only does God deserve true worship, he desires it. Jesus states that, "The hour cometh . . . when true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship him" (v. 23). The Father is looking for people who will worship him. Now, he is not looking for just anyone. On the contrary, he is seeking for true worshipers. True worshipers are described as those that worship "in spirit and in truth." He says the Father is looking for that kind of worshiper. Since God desires worship, it is a matter of his will. He wants it; he wills it; he desires it. Are you searching for God's will? Well, here it is! He desires true worship from you. He wants you to worship him. That means you disappoint him and you disobey him when you do not worship him so.

God Determines True Worship

Not only is true worship deserved by the Father and desired by the Father, it is also determined by the Father. By that I mean that God determines what type of worship is acceptable to him. It is determined by who he is. That's the thrust of the statement, "God is spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (v. 24).

True worship rests in who God is. Who God is determines what constitutes valid worship. Inherent in the meaning of worship is the idea of giving. Whether a gift is appropriate or not depends on what? Naturally, it depends on the receiver. Recently I was in an airport gift shop looking for some gifts for my family before returning home. While looking for a gift for my two year old, Stephen, a saleslady approached me and asked if she could help me. Her questions were well chosen: "Who is this for?" "How old is he?" "These would be appropriate gifts." She knew that the person who is the receiver is the one who determines whether it is appropriate or not.

The point is this. God is spirit. So if God is going to be worshiped, you are going to have to worship God on God's terms. You can not do it any other way. It is not a matter of God being persnickety or difficult. God does not create hoops and then tell you to jump through them. When God demands holiness of his people, it is not because he wants to see if you will do it, it is because he is holy and he cannot fellowship with that which is unholy. Consequently, if there is going to be any fellowship, it must be on the basis of holiness. If it were on the basis of unholiness, he would have to stop being God. It is who he is. He is spirit.

True worship takes place in the spiritual realm. Since God is spirit, in order for you to be a true worshiper, you must worship him on the basis of spirit and truth. This means first of all, that you must worship him in the spiritual realm, in the inner man. God is nonphysical. It does not mean that physical things are not allowed or used in worship, for he does at times prescribe certain physical things; for instance, he prescribes the Lord's

Supper. It was the Lord himself who instituted the Lord's Supper. He commanded us to observe this through two symbols as an act of worship. True worship, therefore, may involve certain physical elements.

To worship him in spirit means simply that he wants to reach the inner man; for instance, "do these things in remembrance of me." Remembrance is non-physical. It is spiritual in the sense of internal. He is using the physical, but it is all about the heart. It is all about your using this act, for example, to remember Christ.

Worship, if it is going to be acceptable to God, must be spiritual. It must be internal. It must be from the heart. This truth has spiritual implications. You cannot worship God when you are spiritually dead. The Bible says, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor. 2:14). Paul tells us in Ephesians that before we came to know Christ, we were dead in trespasses and sin, but when we came to know Christ we were made alive. If I am going to worship God in spirit, I must be made spiritually alive. I must be born again. I must also be a believer who is not only spiritually alive, but is spiritually controlled by God's spirit. I must be a spiritual Christian. This has external applications with internal meaning. It deals with my heart. What he wants is to be in control of my heart and of my life. So if I am going to worship God, it must be primarily internal and spiritual. That means that I must know him as my Savior, and that I am giving him control of my life day by day. Once this is true, I am then able to worship. When it comes to the Lord's Supper, when it comes to a song, when it comes to the preaching of God's Word, when it comes to the time to praise, I can participate from my heart. I can sing to the Lord. I cannot sing to him, however, if I am not saved; I cannot sing to him if I am not under the control of his Spirit. Once I am, though, I can sing to the Lord, I can offer praise to the Lord, I can respond to his Word properly.

True worship is based upon truth. Worshiping God in spirit and in truth also implies that worship must be based on truth; that is, in accordance to reality. Not only must we worship God as he really is, but we cannot worship without knowing the God of the scriptures. Christ himself declares this. In verse 21 he says, "Woman, believe me" That is a command. The implication is that she must pay attention to Christ's words and believe him, for authentic worship is going to be based on truth. The truth has been revealed by God himself, about himself, through his word. Therefore, real worship is based on truth. Are there people who are sincere, but are not doing what the Bible says? Yes. Does that mean that those who are sincere about their worship, but are not doing what the Bible says are not participants of true worship? That is exactly what Scripture says. Those who so worship are not terrible people, they are simply misguided and uninformed.

True worship is based on that which corresponds to reality; that is, God's special revelation, for that is true and real. It refers to both that which is revealed about God in his Word and secondly, that which is revealed about us. In the latter sense, it refers to integrity in my inner part. True worship is based on my coming in truth. There could be no true worship when the woman at the well was saying, "I am interested in worship and you are interested in worship, so let's talk." So let us deal with reality. "You are immoral." That was true; that was reality. That sinful behavior is what must be confronted first. Does that mean you have to be perfect before you can worship? If that were the case, no one could worship. You do not have to be sinless to worship God, but you have to be completely honest before God about who you are and what you have done. You must see yourself as God sees you and be open and in agreement with God about your heart and life. You must be completely honest before God. You do not have to clean up your life, because you cannot clean it up perfectly. You can, however, be honest and open and agree with God about who you are and who he is. There can be no true worship as long as you are pretending to be something you are not.

Reflect for a moment about the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. He worshiped in a way that did not correspond to reality. He was worshiping God in a way that he thought God would like, by merely external obedience. He ignored the innermost sins of his heart. They were never even mentioned. He said, "I thank you that I am not a sinner." The publican went fully aware of his sin. He did not clean up his life and come to God and say, "Now, will you accept me?" Rather, he came to God with integrity, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I deserve nothing except the judgment of God. I do not deserve your grace, but I need your grace." That man's worship was true worship. He went down to his house justified.

This woman worshiped in some fashion. Whether we like it or not, Jesus called for a change in her worship. She worshiped, but her worship was not acceptable. We all worship, but without any doubt, if we could sit down with Jesus alone, he would be able to talk to every one of us about a change that is needed in our worship. If I were able to sit down alone with him this afternoon in a room, he might say, "Okay Tim, you preached about it this morning, let us evaluate *your* worship." Upon seeing some specific need, some specific lack, he would call for change. Maybe he is calling for change in your worship. Are you willing to listen? True worship is deserved by God, desired by God, determined by God. God is looking for worshipers, true worshipers--those who worship in spirit and in truth. Will you let him make one out of you?