

Introduction

I'd like to tell you about a little boy who didn't want to go to church one Sunday morning but his parents made him. As they were walking to the sanctuary, they passed pictures that honored servicemen who had died for their country. The little boy asked an usher who they were. The usher answered, "**They're people from our church who lost their lives in the service.**" The little boy, too young to understand, then fearfully replied, "**Was it the morning or evening service?**"

It's a true story and illustrates that some people aren't all that excited about going to worship services. But they should be because what they're about to experience is or at least can be life's greatest joy. Turn to John 4:19-26 and I'll explain what I mean.

The Priority of Worship

John 4 records one of the most celebrated encounters in the earthly life of Jesus – with the Samaritan woman at the well. The Samaritans, who were half-Jewish and half-Gentile, and the Jews had been at odds with each other for centuries. A primary "**bone of contention**" between them concerned the only true place of worship. The Samaritans believed it was Mount Gerizim in Samaria. The Jews believed it was Jerusalem in Judea. So the Samaritan woman raises that very issue in verse 20. What is the true place of worship? Jesus replies in verse 21 that it is either place or anyplace. He then goes on to say in verses 23 and 24 that it isn't *where* people worship God that counts but *why* and *how*. So let's examine both of those matters, *why* and *how*.

I do need to define what worship is before we do. To worship means to bring details of God's nature and/or works to mind, to consider them, and then to express what we're thinking and feeling as a result.

Now, notice what Jesus says in verse 23. Father God seeks people who will do just that. He doing so suggests the priority of worship, which Ezekiel 44:15 explains. It reveals that worship "**ministers**" to

God. It delights Him and causes others in the spiritual and material worlds to esteem Him. Because He's the dominant reality of the universe, ministering to Him precedes every other work whether it's ministering to people or nature. Worship without work is hypocrisy. Work without worship is idolatry. It makes our service to people and nature a god.

Worshipping God, therefore, should be a central activity of our lives. Richard Foster, a favorite author of mine, writes that prayer is the "**main business**" of our lives. I disagree. I believe "**worship**" is. And God seeks people who will make it just that.

Two Kinds of Worship

Let's be one of those by worshipping in two ways.

One way is implicit in Jesus' statement in verse 21. It's privately, wherever we choose, in God's presence alone. It's just "**Him and me**" as we say it. We make occasions to worship Him in day-to-day life.

Patients are sometimes out of their rooms when I make hospital calls. So, I'll slip away to a quiet place and worship until they return. Or I make worship the last thing I do each day. Some followers of Jesus fall asleep every night praying. I fall asleep worshipping. Those examples show what private worship involves. It's *times* of worship that we plan.

But it involves more than just *times* of worship. It involves a *life* of worship as well. Worship is a constant undertone of our lives. We've made the loveliness and competence of God part of the backdrop of our minds. Worship, as a result, rises spontaneously from the activities, experience, and events of day-to-day life. One of our memory verses, for instance, Isaiah 49:15, is part of the backdrop of my mind. Because it is, seeing a mother and her baby often prompts me to worship the God whose love and affection for me far exceeds the mother's for her baby.

That then is one way we worship, privately.

A second way is publicly. We gather with other followers of Jesus and together worship God. We express to Him and to each other what we're thinking and feeling about His person and works. We do so through

various forms of liturgy whether they're high or low.

Earlier in the service, for instance, we sang a hymn, *How Great Thou Art*. We expressed through it what we thought and felt about God – to Him and to each other. That is public worship.

The Purpose and Benefit of Worship

But whether it's private or public, the *primary* purpose of worship is the same. It's to minister to God not to be ministered to by Him.

The Barna Research Group surveyed thousands of church attenders, asking them this question, "**Have you ever experienced God in a worship service?**" Only one-third said they had.

Barna's question assumes something. It's that worship is primarily about people. But it isn't. Jesus refers to "**true worshippers**" in verse 23. If we're true worshippers, we think and act as if God, not us, is the reference point of worship. Worship isn't primarily about us. It's primarily about Him. What He experiences in it takes precedence over what we experience. Grasp what that implies. Just because we've had a meaningful worship experience doesn't necessarily mean He has. And just because we haven't had one doesn't necessarily mean He hasn't.

Understanding that directs our *primary* intention when we worship. It isn't that God will minister to us. It's that we will minister to Him. You may have noticed that I often lift up my hands when we sing our worship songs. I don't do that for me. In fact I used to feel uncomfortable doing it. I do it for God because, as I learned in the Psalms, it delights Him. I say that to say this. Our *overriding* aim in worship is to delight and please Him on the one hand and to esteem Him on the other. Why? It's because that is its *primary* purpose.

But while worship isn't primarily about us, it is secondarily about us. It highly beneficial to us in two ways.

One is that we often do have a worship experience. We often are met by God Himself. He becomes present to us in some degree of His loveliness and competence. We feel Him moving in, upon, and even

around us. He touches us and ignites our spirit with divine fire.

I had that experience two Sundays ago during the anthem. I had a strong sense of God's presence as I focused on the words the choir sang about Him – so strong in fact remember what I said. I felt like closing out the service right then and there and having quiet time with Him.

Most of you have had similar experiences and know it firsthand. When we minister to God in worship, He often ministers to us in return.

But there's another benefit to it, especially the private kind. It's the transforming of our inner being. Dallas Willard explained well what the private worship I described earlier does: **"It is the single most powerful force in completing and sustaining restoration of our whole beings to God."** It makes us more like Jesus in other words. It's absolutely indispensable to becoming like Him.

As you can see then, while worship isn't primarily about us, it is nonetheless about us. It's one of the most person-transforming of all spiritual exercises – if we do it as Jesus instructs in verses 23-24. He instructs us to do it in two ways.

Worship in Spirit

One is **"in spirit,"** small **"s"**. That word suggests **"with our whole being."** No aspect of our being should be excluded. According to the Book of Psalms, worshipping that way, whether it's private or public, requires three things.

First, our worship must be rational. Our minds must be engaged. We have to think and what we have to think about are the details of God's person and works. People were asked what they daydream about in church. A common answer was upon whom the hanging lights would land if they fell. If we're daydreaming, we aren't worshipping. We may be in a worship service but if we aren't thinking about God's person and works, we aren't worshipping. Worship must be rational.

Worshipping with our whole being requires a second thing. Our worship must be emotional. We not only think but feel as well. There's a

wide range of appropriate emotions – from a noisy passion and joy on the one hand to a quiet reverence and awe on the other.

The source of those emotions should be our thoughts about God's person and works, not the ambience we're in. The lighting, the colors, the furniture, the beat of the music, the singing, the enthusiasm of the crowd can have an emotional impact. There's nothing wrong with that. But it should be primarily our thoughts about God's person and works, not the ambience we're in, that stirs the emotions we feel.

There's a third and final thing worshipping with our whole being requires. Our worship must be physical. We not only think and feel with our minds but act with our bodies as well.

There are three Hebrew and Greek worship words in the Bible translated "**worship**," "**ble**ss" and "**give thanks**." They denote "**to prostrate oneself**," "**to kneel**," and "**to extend the hand**" in that order. Notice that all of those denotations are bodily acts. They clearly imply that God wants us to give the body its fair share in worship – to put it in postures that are consistent with what we think and feel.

The Bible reveals what those postures are: standing (Deuteronomy 29:10); clapping hands (Psalm 47:1); lifting hands (Psalm 63:4); kneeling and bowing down (Psalm 95:6); lifting up the eyes and head (Psalm 123:1), and dancing (Psalm 150:4). I used to wonder when I was growing up why we stood to sing and pray. I thought it was to get the old people to limber up and the drowsy people to wake up. I realize now that standing itself as an act of worship. So is kneeling. A person told me he sometimes feels like kneeling in the aisle when we sing worship songs. He can do that because it's an appropriate act of worship.

That then is what it means to worship God in spirit. It's with our whole being – rationally, emotionally, and physically.

Worship in Truth

Jesus instructs us to worship a second way, "**in truth**." Each of us has a vision of God. It consists of specific knowledge and beliefs about

His nature. That vision of Him is the basis of our worship. **"In truth"** connotes that our vision of Him is worthy of Him.

That it's worthy of Him means two things. First, it's accurate. What we know and believe about Him is so. We don't know or believe things about Him that aren't so. Second, our vision is worthy of Him if it's complete. We know and believe about Him what we need to and can.

All of us are capable of building a vision of God that is accurate and complete. The *First Aim* study on our church's website assists us in doing just that. First, we learn all the facts about Him that we can from the Bible, people in the know, and our own observation and thought. Second, we then infer as many other facts about Him as we can from those facts. The result is a vision that's worthy of Him.

This vision is then the catalyst of our worship. We aren't trying to worship. We aren't making worship just another job we have to do to be right with God. It springs or flows spontaneously from our vision of Him instead. And it's filled with the passion, joy, reverence, and awe I mentioned earlier because it does.

After Sunday school, for instance, I can't wait to get here and listen to the prelude music that Elaine and Bassha play. It works with my vision of God and stirs my desire to worship Him.

Conclusion

And I emphasize the word **"desire."** It prompts me to address my closing remark not to you as I usually do, but to God instead and I speak on behalf of many of you, **"Yahweh my God, worshipping you is life's greatest joy."**