

## **“In Spirit and in Truth” John 4:19-26**

### **INTRODUCTION**

What is the grandest and noblest thing a human being can do? If someone asked you that question, what would you say? Is it winning someone to Jesus, feeding the hungry, healing the injured and sick, dying for Jesus or more? In my view, it isn't any of those. It is instead what Jesus talks about in the passage I read, John 4:19-26.

### **THE GRANDEST AND NOBLEST THING**

John 4 records one of the most celebrated encounters in Scripture – between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. The Samaritans, who were half Jew and half Gentile, and the Jews had been at odds with each other for centuries. They heatedly disputed several issues, one of which was the true place of worship. The Samaritans believed that Mount Gerizim in Samaria was the only true place of worship. But the Jews believed that Jerusalem was.

So, as Jesus conversed with this Samaritan woman at the well, she eventually raised, in verse 20, that very issue. What is the true place of worship? Jesus replied in verse 21 that either place or anyplace could be. He then went on to say that it isn't *where* people worship God that counts but *how*. They must worship Him, according to verses 23 and 24, *“in spirit and in truth.”*

That is one of the most significant statements that Jesus ever made. It reveals what I believe is the grandest and noblest thing that a human being can ever do – worship God in spirit and in truth.

### **WORSHIP**

Let's figure out what that means starting with the word worship. There is a lot of confusion today over what that is. So I'm going to be precise in defining it for you. To worship God means to *engage ourselves with* and *express* the grandeur and goodness of His person

and works. We can do that individually by ourselves or corporately with other Christians. Today, I'm focusing on doing that corporately.

I'll never forget a chapel service we had in seminary. At the close of it, 250 seminary students stood up and joyfully sang Martin Luther's great hymn *A Mighty Fortress*. Notice the two dynamics of what we did. First, there was engagement. 250 minds dwelled upon the greatness of God and His works as found in that hymn. Second, there was expression. 250 tongues declared that greatness in song. That is worship.

That definition reveals something that many, if not most, American Christians today simply do not grasp. Worship is about God, not us.

Last year, I talked with someone I know from another Friends church. He complained about his church's worship services and said, *"The services just don't do anything for me. The worship experiences I have there aren't fulfilling to me."*

His comment reflects the attitude of most Christians about worship. Since the 1950's, certain fads or trends have characterized every generation of the church. The fad or trend in our current generation is called "worship experience." The primary concern of most Christians is having meaningful and fulfilling worship experiences. The problem is the experience they're talking about is theirs not God's.

Don't get me wrong. It's valid, even good for us to have a meaningful experience when we worship and I pray that all of us do.

But we must think straight about this. Worship is about God, not us. It isn't about Him ministering to us. It's about us ministering to Him. The reference point of worship, in other words, isn't what we experience. It's what He experiences. It isn't whether or not we're delighted and pleased. It's whether or not He is. That implies that just because we've had a meaningful "worship experience" doesn't mean that He has – or just because we haven't had doesn't mean that He hasn't.

That shows us what we should concentrate on and commit ourselves to when we come to our worship services on Sunday morning. It's delighting and pleasing Him, not being delighted and pleased.

You may have noticed that I often lift my hands when we sing our worship choruses. I never once did that until I was 30 years old and learned what the book of Psalms teaches. God wants us to give our body its fair share in worship and one of the ways that we do that is by lifting our hands in the air to Him. Now, lifting my hands in the air made me feel quite self-conscious and uncomfortable, but I did it anyway. Why? It's because worship isn't about me. It's about God. Doing that delights and pleases Him. So I did it even though at first I didn't like it.

You get the point. Our primary objective in worship isn't being delighted and pleased. It's delighting and pleasing – God.

Thankfully, Jesus tells us how to do that in verses 23 and 24. It's in two ways.

## **IN SPIRIT**

First, we delight and please God by worshipping Him in spirit. My NASB translates the word "spirit" with a small "s" and that's correct. That word suggests, I think, "with our whole being." That is probably what Jesus is saying. We should worship God with our whole being. That means that no aspect of our being should be excluded. Worshipping that way requires three things.

First, our worship must be rational. Our mind must be engaged. We have to think to worship and what we have to think about are the person and works of God. If our mind isn't engaged, then we aren't worshipping.

I was in a worship service years ago when I suddenly heard the pastor call my name. He was asking me to pray for the requests that he had just mentioned. The problem was I had been daydreaming and had no idea what those requests were. So I said a prayer that generic enough to cover every possible person and thing on earth.

Notice something. I was in the worship service but wasn't worshipping. Our worship must be rational. We must be mentally involved. We must be thinking about the person and works of God.

Worshipping with our whole being requires a second thing. Our

worship must be emotional. We must not only think but feel as well. According to Psalms, there is a wide range of legitimate emotions we can feel in worship - all the way from a noisy passion and joy on the one hand to a quiet fear and awe on the other.

The atmosphere that we're in can certainly affect the emotions we feel. The lighting, the colors, the furniture, the beat of the music, the enthusiasm of the crowd and so on have an emotional impact and rightly so. But thoughts of who God is and what He has done, is doing, and will do should be the primary source of our emotional response in worship. If they aren't, then we're feeling but not worshipping.

I have a family member who by her own admission judges her church's worship services by how emotional they are. That's fine as long as the emotions are rooted primarily in the person and works of God. If they aren't, the services may be valuable but they aren't worship.

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

There are three worship words in our English Bibles. They are the Hebrew and Greek words translated "worship" and the Hebrew words translated "bless" and "thanksgiving." Those words in the Hebrew and Greek mean literally "to prostrate oneself," "to kneel," and "to extend the hand" in that order. Notice that all of those definitions are physical acts. The message is clear. As Bible commentator Derek Kidner says it, God wants us to give our body its fair share in worship. He wants us to make it have postures that are consistent with what we think and feel.

The Bible tells us what those postures are: Deuteronomy 29:10 - standing; Psalm 47:1 - clapping hands; Psalm 63:4 - lifting hands; Psalm 95:6 - kneeling and bowing down; Psalm 123:1 - lifting up the eyes and head; and Psalm 150:4 - dancing. I used to wonder when I was growing up why we stood to sing and pray. I thought it was to get old people to limber up and drowsy people to wake up. But I now realize that standing itself is an act of worship. So is kneeling. One of you told me that you

sometimes feel like kneeling in the aisle when we sing worship songs. My response was to go right ahead because kneeling is an act of worship.

So that's the first thing that we have to do to delight and please God. We have to worship Him in spirit, with our whole being. Our worship should be rational, emotional, and physical.

## **IN TRUTH**

The second that that we have to do is worship Him "in truth." The word "truth" here has two possible reference points. One of those is our everyday life. Our everyday life makes our worship true or false.

The Old Testament makes that perfectly clear. God says something startling in passages like Proverbs 15:8-9 and Amos 5:21-24. He "hated" the Israelites' worship. It was an "abomination" to Him. "Hate" and "abomination" are quotes. The Israelites' worship disgusted Him in other words. It "turned His stomach" as we say it.

And He explains why. It was because their everyday life made their worship a lie. They *worshipped* as if *He* were the dominant reality of the universe. But they *lived* as if *they* were. They lived according to their own wishes and will, not His. And that, He declares, made their worship a lie.

It does the same with ours. We come here on Sunday morning and worship as if God were the dominant reality of the universe. Also living as if He were makes that worship true and He's delighted. But living as if He weren't makes it a lie and He's disgusted.

The Bible teaches that worship is just part of our spiritual life, not the entirety of it. It is a spiritual activity that must flow from an overall life of discipleship to God. I'm talking about an everyday life in which we seek and live for Him and His kingdom first. Such an everyday life makes our worship of Him true and He's delighted.

That is in fact the single most decisive factor in delighting Him.

Eight years ago, I attended a worship service at Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral. From a human point of view, it was by far the best

service I've ever been in – professional orchestra and choir, cutting edge sound and visual equipment, the loveliest sanctuary I've ever seen, and much more. The orchestra performed a rendition of *A Mighty Fortress* that night that featured five professional trumpeters stationed at different locations in the sanctuary. It was dynamite.

Contrast that with a worship service at a little Friends church in Cleveland. I filled the pulpit there. From a human point of view, it was one of the worst services I've ever been in. The song leader and the only instrumentalist they had, the organist, were just awful. The hymns were sung far too slowly and the organist, for some reason I still don't know, paused about five second between stanzas.

But listen to this. The second worship service, as poorly done as it was, delighted God just as much as the first did, if not more. That's because the people in it were some of the finest followers of Jesus I've known. They lived for Him and His kingdom first. So, their service delighted Him just as much as the Crystal Cathedral's did, if not more.

The decisive factor in delighting God isn't the trappings of our worship services, as important as they are. It is instead the life that we live everyday in between. That life makes our worship either true or false.

## **CONCLUSION**

Last night, Ohio State, ranked number 1, and Texas, ranked number 2, played each other in football. If you watched it, you saw that their fans rose to the occasion. They put their whole being into the game because their teams were the best in the country.

But what you and I do every Sunday morning here is far more significant than what Ohio State and Texas did last night. We do the grandest and noblest thing that a human being can do – worship the dominant reality of the universe, the triune God.

So, let's rise to the occasion next Sunday and every Sunday. Let's worship God in spirit and in truth.