

True Worship

¹⁹ The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you *Jews* say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. ²⁴ God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:19–24)

Imagine meeting a married couple who come to you for some advice. They are having a problem, and it is a strange one. The husband keeps buying his wife daisies as a gift. That sounds fine, but it turns out that she is allergic to daisies and breaks out in a fit of hay-fever when they come close to her. She has asked him to buy her a different kind of flower, but daisies happen to be his favourite flower. Because they are his favourite flower, he insists on buying nothing but his favourite flower for his wife, to show her his love. What would you say to this couple? Probably most of us would tell the husband that if he keeps buying her flowers that she is allergic to, then he isn't really loving her, he is loving his own gifts. He is loving his love, but not his wife.

Something just like that happens every Sunday in churches around the world. People offer God something they love. They love to offer the thing they love. But it is not at all clear that what they are offering is what God loves.

That's the difference between false worship and true, and it is what we find explained in John 4. There are some conversations in Scripture that are worth a sermon on their own, and the portion of Christ's conversation with the Samaritan woman about worship is one of them.

We remember the scene: Jesus is passing through Samaria and stops to rest by a well while His disciples go into the town to buy food. A Samaritan woman comes alone to draw water, and Jesus engages her in conversation, seeking to move the conversation from the physical to the spiritual, from physical water to the spiritual water of the Gospel. We remember that eventually she, and many other Samaritans came to faith in Christ, and Jesus stayed there two days.

But it was during the course of that conversation that she brought up the topic of where worship should take place. The Samaritans only accepted the first five books of Moses, so they said the Temple was to be on Mount Gerizim, where Moses had announced the blessings, overlooking Shechem, where Abram first entered Canaan. The Jews of course believed that God had chosen Jerusalem, under King David as the place of worship. So she brings up the worship dispute of her day: whom should I believe – Samaritans or Jews?

Of course, when this dear lady decided to challenge Jesus on the topic of worship, she really had no idea whom she was dealing with. This is a 40kg straw-weight taking on the heavyweight champion of the world. But instead of pounding her into the dust with one blow, our Lord graciously and meekly answers her questions and corrects her thinking.

Now the worship dispute between the Jews and Samaritans is not our dispute. But we do face worship wars on every side. On the biggest and grandest scale is the question of whether all religions really worship the same God. Don't Jews, Moslems, Christians really worship the same God?

But then narrow it down to Christianity, and there are more worship wars: are we saved by baptism? Are we saved by the Mass? Saved by grace through faith? This is the great division between Catholicism and Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodox.

Narrow it down to Protestants, and there is a battle over how we should do baptism and the Lord's Supper, over how our churches should be led and governed.

Even once it is narrowed down to baptistic evangelicals, we still have serious disagreements. Should we do only what the Bible tells us? Or should we do anything that the Bible doesn't prohibit? Should we have women preachers? Should we pray in tongues? How should we preach, and how long? How should we pray? What about music? Contemporary or traditional? Bands and worship teams or a conductor with an orchestra? Psalms only or hymns as well? Modern choruses or not? Instrumental or only accappella? Choirs or none? Specials or none? Organ only or the fenderstratocaster?

So from the biggest question, are we worshipping the right God, down to the smallest detail of styles, methods, and circumstances in our worship services, there seem to be plenty of ways to get worship wrong. This matters to you, because you have been made to worship. The Bible says that you were made in the image of God, which means you reflect God, and were designed to do so: to mirror back to God the glory of God. And in fact, humans can't help worshipping: we are always treasuring something, valuing something, pursuing something, loving something. You are a worshipper by design: God made you that way. The question is simply, who are you worshipping and how? If you get it wrong, then the very purpose of your life is being missed. You become like a cracked mirror, warping the image of God. Not worshipping rightly is to be a ship off course; it is to be foolishly valuing the wrong things in the wrong way, wasting precious time on futile things.

So, coming to our rescue is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate authority. When He speaks on worship, we know we have the final word. So let's pay even closer attention to the Lord's words with this Samaritan woman as He teaches us three vital concepts about true worship.

I. Not All Worship Is True Worship

¹⁹ The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you *Jews* say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth;

The Samaritan woman raises the dispute of where worship should be. Now the first answer Jesus gives is something we'll come back to: that in Him, through the new covenant, all of the old worship forms will be changed or replaced. So in one sense, the debate over the Temple is a non-issue, once Jesus dies and the Temple veil is torn, then Christ Himself is the Temple.

But notice, Jesus doesn't merely say, "Look, none of this matters. Let's stop nitpicking over details. Everyone is right in their own way, as long as they're sincere." No, Jesus drops a bomb on the idea of ecumenical, relativistic worship.

²² You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.

Put simply, Samaritan worship is false – they do not really know the object of their worship. They followed false teachers under the northern kingdom kings, and it never got better. The Samaritans have a form of worship, but the object of their worship is not real and true and correct. By contrast, the Jews are the instrument through which God's redemption to the world comes. Salvation is of the Jews. Therefore, the books of Scripture delivered to the Jews are the right ones, and the way to worship God is found in the Jewish Scriptures.

Jesus does not side with the ecumenical pluralist who says, "No one is wrong at the end of the day.

Everyone means well, and meaning well is at the heart of worship.” No, Jesus says that the object of your worship is at the heart of worship, and the Samaritans have got it wrong. Their worship is false.

Notice, in the next verse, Jesus makes it even clearer. He uses the term “true worshipers”. If you are going to put the word *true* in front of the word worshipers, it means you want to qualify what kind of worshiper we mean. And evidently there are true worshippers, so there must be their opposites: false worshippers.

Not all worship is true worship.

This is really important to understand, because not everyone believes that today. It is common to think that if you offer something to God, anything, that God will in some way be pleased. As if worship is buying Christmas presents for some poor child you have never met or seen. Any contribution is welcome, any donation is met with approving gratitude.

But that is not what the Bible teaches about worship. In fact, just a few pages into Scripture and we meet the first worship war between Cain and Abel. Abel offers from his flock by faith, and he is accepted. Cain offers from the ground without faith, and his offering is rejected. Now whether Abel's was accepted because it was a blood sacrifice and Cain's was not, the text doesn't tell us. But Hebrews 11:4 does tell us “⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain”. Abel trusted in something God had revealed to them, and worshipped accordingly.

Cain was concerned with his own offering, offering what he enjoyed, what he thought was good enough. Cain decided on what God should be pleased with. Cain had the attitude of moderns who think that anything I give in God's direction should be pleasing to God. And Cain was very offended when it was not. Offended to the point of murderous envy.

That's no isolated incident. Throughout the history of Israel, we have false worship happening in two ways. The first way is when people worship the wrong god. They break Commandment 1 of the Ten Commandments. They worship some false deity: Molech, Baal, Dagon, Diana, Zeus. The second way is when people worship the right God in the wrong way. They break Commandments 2 of the Ten Commandments, worshipping God in some contrived, man-made way. They worship Jehovah by means of golden calves, or constructed high places, or mini-holy of holies, or teraphim. They worship Jehovah but bring bruised and injured animals. Jesus spoke of the worship of many Pharisees of his day as false: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" (Mat 15:8-9)

You can commit false worship by worshipping false deities, or Gaia, or the Cosmic Spirit, or a monotheistic deity (who is specifically said to not be a Trinity and not have a son). But you can also commit false worship by worshipping the Triune God through a means He has not appointed, approaching Him by means of water, or food, or a sinful priest, making a statue of Him, or speaking or singing to Him in ways that are not truthful, either in statement, or in sentiment. Not all worship is true worship.

But now comes the good news.

II. God is Seeking True Worship

²³ But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for

the Father is seeking such to worship Him.

Jesus says that the hour is coming and has already arrived when true worship will take place. It is not yet, but it is already. Why? Because the work of Messiah on the cross is going to make true worship possible to people all over the globe. It is already, because Jesus is right there in front of this Samaritan women, but it is still future, because He must still accomplish His work on the cross. Once He has done that, neither Jerusalem nor Mt Gerizim will be the focus of worship.

But then Jesus adds these wonderful words: for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God the Father desires and looks for such worshippers. Jesus is telling us why His prediction of true worshippers is going to come true: because the Father desires it and will make it happen.

That's good news for us. It means a sovereign, powerful God is the initiator and driver behind true worship. It is not for us to happen upon a one in a billion combination that unlocks true worship. No: the Father is seeking true worshippers, and He will find them. In fact, He will make them.

Now when we hear that God desires true worshippers to worship Him, we should ask ourselves two questions. First, why does He want this? Second, how will He get this?

Maybe the first question seems irreverent to you. Maybe we shouldn't ask why God wants worship. But I think it is a very important question. Why would an infinite God, perfect in every way, want worship from me? What could that possibly add to Him? If you were the most beautiful person on Earth, gracing every magazine cover in the world, hounded by the paparazzi, cellphones filming you everywhere you went, would you seek the worship of all the world's cockroaches? And if you got it, would it add much to your beauty? So why would God seek worship from weak, decaying, mortal humans, usually committed to petty concerns and selfish squabbles?

The answer is found in Psalm 50. Look closely as to who gets the benefit from worship.

⁷ "Hear, O My people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you; I *am* God, your God! ⁸ I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices Or your burnt offerings, *Which are* continually before Me. ⁹ I will not take a bull from your house, *Nor* goats out of your folds. ¹⁰ For every beast of the forest *is* Mine, *And* the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field *are* Mine. ¹² "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world *is* Mine, and all its fullness. ¹³ Will I eat the flesh of bulls, Or drink the blood of goats? ¹⁴ Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High. ¹⁵ Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." (Psalm 50:7–15)

Worship is not for God's benefit – it is for yours. You and I get the benefit or worship: we see and experience fullness of joy by beholding perfect beauty. What does God receive? He receives not benefit, but His own glory refracted, and magnified as humans come to revel in Him. He does not grow in Himself, but His loveliness is now expanded and is clearer through creatures that now love Him as their chief joy. Why does God seek this? Because He loves to share His glory, and delights to share His delight. He takes pleasure in bringing pleasure to His creatures, and He knows He is the ultimate pleasure.

God is not a needy god on the hunt for compliments. God is not a lonely god seeking fans and sycophants. God is not a vain god insisting on flattery. God is the source of all beauty, the very meaning of perfection, of excellence, of joy.

So that brings us to the second question about the Father's seeking. *How* does the father seek out these true worshippers? It is not as if there is this island where all the true worshippers live, and the Father just needs to find them. No, Romans 3:11 tells us bluntly, "¹¹ *There is none who*

understands; There is none who seeks after God. (Romans 3:11)

If no one seeks after God, that just reduced your potential candidates for true worshippers down to zero. What this means is that the Father seeks true worshipers by making them true worshippers.

We know that because Jesus keeps using the word “Father” in this passage. It is not the vague worship of a faraway God. This is the worship of a people who have come to know God as Father. This reminds us of one of the key verses of this book.

¹² But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: ¹³ who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12–13)

God enables this. God draws people to His Son, Jesus Christ. He is going to say this to another crowd in chapter 6:

⁴⁴ No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:44)

The Spirit works so that their eyes may be opened, and they believe and receive Christ and are changed. God regenerates and changes the heart, so that now someone loves what he did not love before. He now has God's nature residing in him, so he has an appetite for the things of God, the person of God, truth about God.

Do you know what this means? At the heart of true worship is the word *grace*. God seeks us out. God reveals Himself. God draws us.

It is coming and now is: Jesus Himself is the key to true worship. Receiving the Son is the way to know and love the Father.

Jesus has told us that not all worship is true worship. He has told us the good news of grace: the Father is seeking true worshippers. But now we want to know the key that will help solve the worship wars. What is true worship?

III. True Worship Corresponds to God's Nature

²³ But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. ²⁴ God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

There you have it: true worshippers worship the Father in spirit and truth. Verse 24 gives you the theology behind it all: God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

What does this mean?

First, notice the way the word *spirit* occurs twice: when referring to God, and then when referring to the worshipper. That tells us that true worship is a matter of matching: the nature of the worship matches the nature of God. The kind of worship corresponds, agrees with, is consonant with the object of the worship. God is a certain way, and so true worship of Him is similar to God in its nature. True worship is correspondence between who God is and the way we worship Him.

Second, notice also that Jesus uses the word *must*. This is a strong word in the original that means, it is necessary, it is imperative, it is essential. Worshipping in spirit and in truth is not just one

version of worship, one flavour. This is the only way to worship God truly. The only way to worship God truly is this way: correspondence between who God is and the way we worship Him.

So let's look closely at the statement of verse 24: God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

This might sound strange, but one of the problems we have here has to do with punctuation – we have a capital -S Spirit, and a lowercase -s spirit. See, the New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek manuscripts we have were either written entirely in capital letters (majiscules) or entirely in lowercase letters (miniscules). The Greek language didn't capitalise words like we do. You see, your Bible has God *is* Spirit, with that word Spirit capitalised. Then when speaking of true worshippers, it says they worship in spirit, but in the lowercase. It's the same word, pneuma, but without the capitalisation, we have a number of options. Does it mean we worship God by the Holy Spirit, or that we worship God in our own spirits, or that we worship God with spiritual worship?

I think the best way to understand this is to feel the contrast between the false worship of the Samaritans and the true worship Jesus was teaching. Why was their worship false? First, because they had forsaken the truth of the Scriptures. The full revelation of who God is was not guiding their worship.

Second, they had centred their worship on some external, visual, man-made thing, something very physical, visual, and tangible.

By contrast, God *is* Spirit. Not merely a spirit. God in His essence is spirit. He is invisible to human eyes. He is unknowable and incomprehensible unless He reveals Himself to you.

To properly worship an omnipresent, invisible, infinite being you do not do so with visual aids. You do not try to make pictures of Him. You do not try to reduce Him to a set of rituals. Instead, God must do a work in that part of you that communes with God: your spirit. He must link your nature to His own by His indwelling Spirit. Now you worship God from the inner man. It is not an outside-in worship. It flows from within, from a new nature inside you that now calls God, “Father”. It is inward, genuine, sincere in best sense. The Spirit of God resides in your spirit, and enables you to know and love spiritual realities. You can love God without icons and ornaments and incense and paintings; without rock bands and purple lights and visual eye-candy. This is a deep, inner work of regeneration (new birth) and illumination (new sight). Your spirit now longs for and loves the things of God:

But as it is written: *“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”* ¹⁰ But God has revealed *them* to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. ¹¹ For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. (1 Corinthians 2:9–12)

True worship corresponds with God's nature.

But all too many people believe that their sincerity and their inner light, and their emotions are from God's Spirit. That's why worshipping in spirit is twinned with the word truth. True worship is worship in spirit and truth.

Where do we find truth? Jesus tells us in John 17:17: Your Word is truth. God's Word, recorded in the Scriptures is truth. It is not enough to have the Spirit of God indwell our spirit and give us the

inner prompting to sincerely love God. No, the Spirit of God rides in His own chariot, which is the Word of God that He inspired. The Word is where you find who God is, what He is like, what are His attributes, what are His ways, His plans, His promises, His will, His kingdom. The Samaritans worshipped what they did not know, because they did not have the full Scriptures to give them knowledge of God.

The fact that worship must be in truth tells you a few things.

Worship is objective. It is not governed by pure emotions. There are facts about God that we respond to. For that matter, we can find some agreement about what is appropriate and inappropriate to worship God when we search out the truth.

Worship can be understood. It is not a totally mystical experience nor completely subjective, individualistic or relative. It's not totally abstract. It can be thought about, reasoned, analysed, contemplated, understood.

Worship can and must be learned. Your worship is to deepen as you learn and yield to more truth. This is why the church is to devote so much of its effort to teaching. Because worship does not grow where knowledge does not grow.

If the spirit is the train, then truth is the railway tracks that guides and leads and directs the spirit. If spirit is the heat, then truth is the fuel that it burns. If spirit is the fountain, then truth is the channel and nozzle directing that fountain. True worship corresponds with God's nature. Spirit and truth. Delight and doctrine. Subjective pleasure and objective truth. Sincerity of heart and reality of revealed Scripture. Spiritual in manner, and in accordance with truth.

Now, we haven't solved every worship question out there. But these three concepts help us clip away a lot of error. When we know that not all worship is true worship, we don't feel obligated to find a way to harmonise all religions, or all stripes of Christianity. When we know that God seeks true worshippers, we can find great solace in that word *grace*: God condescends to reveal Himself, to open eyes, to show us truth, beginning in the gospel.

And then the third concept, when applied thoroughly will answer many questions. We need only ask: is this worship rooted in truth? Did God command it? And does it correspond with the kind of God He is? Does it seem to communicate the kind of love, the kind of reverence, the kind of hope you give to the God revealed in Scripture?

If God hated the flowers you bought Him, would you keep buying them because you love them? In that case, you are loving your own love, loving your own gifts, loving your own preferences, and worshipping your own worship. To worship God truly is to find out what He loves, what He is like, what He desires. For that, we must worship Him in spirit and in truth.