THE PRIORITY OF TRUE WORSHIP

John 4:23-24

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August 11, 2013

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Years ago when the billionaire Howard Hughes died, his company’s public relations director asked the casinos in Las Vegas, where Hughes owned multiple casinos, to show him respect by giving him a minute of silence. For an uncomfortable sixty seconds, the casinos fell eerily silent. Then a pit boss looked at his watch, leaned forward, and whispered, “Okay, roll the dice. He’s had his minute.” (From the book, Howard Hughes: The Hidden Years, cited in “Our Daily Bread,” 11/77.)

I wonder if sometimes we treat God as those gamblers in Las Vegas treated Howard Hughes. We interrupt our busy schedules once a week, rush into church, give God “His hour,” and then forget about Him and get back to what we’d rather be doing.

John MacArthur was certainly correct to title his book on worship, The Ultimate Priority [Moody Press, 1983]. God created us for the ultimate priority of worshiping Him. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Or, as John Piper modifies it, our chief end is “to glorify God by enjoying Him forever” (Desiring God [Multnomah Books], 1996 edition, p. 15).

It’s no accident that the longest book in the Bible, Psalms, is all about praising and worshiping God. When we get to the end of the Bible, we see the saints and angels in heaven falling on their faces and worshiping God (Rev. 4:10-11; 5:8-14; 7:9-11). Since worship will be our ceaseless activity and greatest joy in heaven, we ought to be practicing it now.

Here are a few definitions of worship:

John MacArthur: “Worship is our innermost being responding with praise for all that God is, through our attitudes, actions, thoughts, and words, based on the truth of God as He has revealed Himself” (The Ultimate Priority [Moody Press], p. 127). Or, he gives a simpler definition: “Worship is all that we are, reacting rightly to all that He is” (ibid., p. 147).
William Temple: “To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, and to devote the will to the purpose of God” (cited in MacArthur, ibid., p. 147).

My definition is not so eloquent: Worship is an inner attitude and feeling of awe, reverence, gratitude, and love toward God resulting from a realization of who He is and who we are.

Also, John MacArthur gives this helpful clarification (on gty.org, “Messiah: The Living Water,” part 2): “Worship, by the way, is not music. Worship is loving God. Worship is honoring God. Worship is knowing God for who He is, adoring Him, obeying Him, proclaiming Him as a way of life. Music is one way we express that adoration.” As Paul states (1 Cor. 10:31), “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Thus all of life is to be oriented “God-ward,” permeated with a sense of His majesty and glory.

Jesus’ words about worship to this unnamed Samaritan woman occur in the context of His witness to bring this woman to saving faith. We might not think that witnessing is the right context to talk about the priority of worship. But Jesus takes her implicit question (4:20) about whether Samaritan worship or Jewish worship is correct and uses it to zero in on the aim of the gospel: to turn sinners into true worshipers of God. We learn:

Since God is seeking true worshipers who worship Him in spirit and truth, we should make it our priority to become such worshipers.

Jesus tells this woman that a significant transition is about to take place (4:23), “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.” Jesus’ presence began this change from the old covenant to the new. Under the old way of worship, place was significant: all Jewish males had to appear before God in Jerusalem for the three annual feasts (Deut. 16:16). But in the new way which Jesus inaugurated, He is the new temple (John 2:19-21). Believers are being built into a holy temple in the Lord (Eph. 2:21; 1 Pet. 2:5). Thus where we gather to worship is secondary. How and whom we worship is primary.
Unbelievers, such as the Samaritan woman at this point, often mistakenly think that if they go through the proper externals of “worship,” then things are okay between them and God. As long as they go to a church building and go through the weekly rituals, they figure that everything is fine. But they haven’t dealt with God on the heart level. They haven’t repented of their sins of thought, word, and deed. So Jesus tells her that it’s not the externals that matter as much as the internal. We must make it our priority to become true worshipers of God in spirit and truth. Note three truths from these important verses:

1. **God is seeking true worshipers.**

As Jonathan Edwards argued, God created the world for His own glory (see John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory* [Crossway Books]). Everything, including the salvation of His elect and even the damnation of the wicked, will result in glory to God. So God now is seeking worshipers who will bring Him glory, not just for an hour on Sunday, but every day through all their activities. We can’t properly worship God on Sundays if we’re not worshiping Him throughout the week. You begin that process by repenting of your sins and trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. You grow in that process as you bring every thought, word, and deed under His lordship. Note two things:

A. The fact that God seeks true worshipers implies that there are false worshipers.

False worshipers either worship something other than God or they may attempt to worship the true God, but do it in ways that actually dishonor Him. But either way, sincerity is not the only criterion for measuring true worship. All true worshipers are sincere, but all sincere worshipers are not true. For example, there are devout, sincere worshipers of Allah or Krishna or Buddha or the Mormon god or the Jehovah’s Witness god. But they are sincerely wrong, because they are not worshiping the only living and true God, who has revealed Himself in the Bible.

There are also Christians who are sincere, but their worship is man-centered. Sometimes it’s patterned more after the entertainment world than after the Bible. It draws attention to the performers, but not to the Lord. Or, on the other end of the Christian
spectrum, some go through ancient liturgies week after week, but their hearts are not in submission to God. They mistakenly think that because they went through the rituals, they’re good for another week. They’re like the Jewish leaders of whom Jesus said (Matt. 15:8, citing Isaiah 29:13), “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.” So we need to be careful not to fall into the category of false worshipers.

B. The fact that God is seeking true worshipers means that this is of utmost importance: it is our priority.

In verse 24, Jesus says that these true worshipers “must worship in spirit and truth” (italics mine). It’s a necessity. It isn’t optional; it’s essential. A. W. Pink (Exposition of John, online at monergism.com) points out that there are three musts in John: “You must be born again” (3:7); the Son of Man must be lifted up (3:14); and “those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:24). The first concerns the Spirit, who imparts the new birth. The second concerns the Son, who was lifted up on the cross as the atonement for our sins. And the third concerns the Father, the object of our worship. And the order is important. First, you must be born again by trusting in Christ’s death for you. Only then can you worship God properly.

So the first point is that God is seeking you as a true worshiper. If you haven’t yet put your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, start there. If you have trusted in Christ and perhaps have drifted off course, come back to this as your priority: God wants you to become a true worshiper.

2. The true worshipers that the Father seeks worship Him in spirit and truth.

Jesus repeats this twice so that we don’t miss it (4:23-24): “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.” To be true worshipers, we must worship both in spirit and in truth. To worship in spirit without truth is to worship false gods. To worship in truth without spirit is to fall into dead orthodoxy. We may be doctrinally correct, but we’re lifeless. And, the Father must be the focus of our worship.
A. We should worship the Father, who is spirit.

Jesus emphasizes three times to this Samaritan woman that it is the Father that we are to worship (4:21, 23 [2x]). And, He explains to her that God is spirit. This is His essential nature. We looked at this last time. It means that God does not have a material body. He is invisible to human eyes (John 1:18; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16). The fact that He is spirit means that He is not confined to one locale at a time. He is omnipresent. He has existed as spirit for all eternity, before He created the material universe. When we’re born again, we possess human spirits (John 3:6), which can worship Him. Because He is the only omnipresent spirit, we can worship Him anywhere and know that He is there.

Through Jesus, we come to know God as our Father, whom we worship. John Piper ("Not in This or That Mount, but in Spirit and Truth," at desiringGod.org) suggests three reasons that Jesus emphasizes the Father to this Samaritan woman: First, God is the Father of the Samaritans. This woman mentions “our father Jacob” (4:12) and “our fathers worshiped in this mountain” (4:20). So Jesus shifts the focus from these human fathers to the Father, who alone is to be worshiped.

Second, Jesus is pointing out that the Father has spiritual children. Having children is what makes one a father. We become God’s children through believing in Jesus and being born of the Spirit (1:12-13; 3:5-7). Being children of the Father implies that we have a personal relationship with Him.

Third, God is the Father of His unique Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This does not mean that Jesus became the Son at a point in time. There never was a time when He was not God’s Son. The relationship of God as the Father of Jesus the Son points to Jesus’ sharing the same essential nature as the Father. Jesus is God. John 5:18 states, “For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.” In John 10:30, Jesus stated, “I and the Father are one.” In John 17:5, Jesus prays, “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” God the Father and God the Son have always been equal as God.
I’m not suggesting that Jesus intended for the Samaritan woman to grasp the mystery of the trinity in this first encounter! But the Holy Spirit inspired these words so that we would come to worship God in His triune nature. As Jesus says (John 5:23), the Father has given all judgment to the Son “so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.” True worship worships the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit (Phil. 3:3).

B. We should worship the Father in spirit.

To worship in spirit is to worship from the heart or from within. It’s opposed to formal, ceremonial, external worship by those whose hearts are not right with God (Matt. 15:8). Thus the most important factor in becoming a worshiper is to guard and cultivate your heart for God. John Calvin (Calvin’s Commentaries [Baker], p. 161) says that worship in the spirit is the inward faith of the heart which produces prayer, purity of conscience, and self-denial, leading to obedience.

I believe that worship in spirit is, in part, emotional or felt. This is not to say that we should pump up our emotions with music or crowd fervor. Genuine emotions for God stem from focusing our minds on the truth of who He is and what He has done for us at the cross. But if your worship never touches your emotions, something is wrong. It’s like my love for my wife. My relationship with her is not built on my feelings, but rather on my commitment to her. But when I think about all that she means to me, I feel love for her and I ought to express that love in some outward manner that shows her that I love her.

C. We should worship the Father in truth.

God has revealed Himself to us in His Word of truth and supremely in His Son, who is the truth (John 1:18; 14:6; 17:17). To worship God in truth means that we worship Him for all that He is in the majesty of His attributes as revealed in all of Scripture. We worship Him for His love, but also for His justice and righteousness. We worship Him for His kindness, but also for His severity (Rom. 11:22). We worship Him for His sovereignty and for His grace. We worship Him when He gives, but also when He takes away (Job 1:20-21). We worship Him for all His ways. The Bible is
our only guide for worshiping in truth. As I said, worship in spirit flows out of worship in truth. Feeding your mind on the truth of God moves your spirit to praise and love God.

Since God is seeking true worshipers who worship Him in spirit and truth ...

3. **Make it your priority to become a true worshiper of God.**

This applies in three directions:

A. If I’m not growing as a true worshiper, I’m not in line with what God is seeking to do in my life.

As we’ve seen, personal worship is not restricted to a few minutes on Sunday mornings. In the context of 1 Corinthians 10:31, where Paul mentions glorifying God through eating and drinking, he is talking about relationships that do not cause offense to others, whether to unbelievers or believers (10:32). So how we treat others should be a matter of worship. Evangelistic or missionary efforts are a matter of worship (Rom. 15:16). Giving to support Christian workers or to help fellow believers is a matter of worship (Phil. 4:18; Heb. 13:16). Godly behavior is a matter of worship (Eph. 5:10; Phil. 1:11). An attitude of praise and thanksgiving is a matter of worship (Heb. 13:15). The point is, you can’t live a self-centered, worldly life all week long and then come to church on Sunday and worship.

B. If we’re not growing as a worshiping church, we’re not in line with what God is seeking to do in this body.

Why do you come to church? If your focus is to get something out of the church service, you’ve got it wrong. Your focus should be to give praise and honor and thanks with all the saints to the God who gave His Son for you. Soren Kierkegaard pointed out that often a congregation views itself as an audience, watching the worship leaders and the pastor give their presentation or performance. But the truth is that the congregation is actually the cast of actors, with the worship leaders and the pastor acting as prompters, giving cues from the wings. The real audience is God and the entire presentation is offered to Him, for His pleasure and glory. So the issue when you come to church is not, “Did I get anything out of it?” but, “Did I give God the heartfelt praise and thanks and glory that He deserves?” That’s our aim as a church.
C. If we’re not seeking to help others locally and globally become worshipers, we’re not in line with God’s purpose.

John Piper wrote (Let the Nations be Glad [Baker], p. 17), “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man.” His words apply not only to missions in other countries, but also to our efforts to reach the lost in Flagstaff. Our aim is to turn sinners into worshipers. That was Jesus’ aim with this sinful Samaritan woman.

Conclusion

Here are seven practical suggestions on how to grow as a true worshiper of the Father:

1. Make sure that you truly believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

   You don’t worship to gain eternal life; you worship because God has given you eternal life. Worship is your response after you have believed in God’s grace through Christ’s death on your behalf.

2. Establish a daily time alone with God in the Word and prayer.

   I cannot over-emphasize this. Worship is your response to the truth that God has revealed in His Word. Prayer is a response to the truth of the Word. Without spending consistent time alone with the Lord, your soul will shrivel up. You won’t worship.

3. Eliminate all of the garbage from the world that hinders your growth in worshiping God.

   The world is constantly competing for our worship. It bombards us daily through the media. If a TV show or movie defiles you or crowds out your daily time with the Lord, cut it out. If the computer gobbles up your time, you’ve got to restrict it. If you’re yielding to the temptation to view porn on your computer, you’re in serious spiritual trouble (Matt. 5:27-30)! You cannot glorify God with your body unless you flee from immorality (1 Cor. 6:18-20). You’ve got to discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7), because true worship is inseparable from godliness.

4. Prepare your heart Saturday night for corporate worship on Sunday morning.
I have an advantage on you, in that to survive in the pulpit on Sundays, I have to prepare my heart Saturday evenings. I don’t go to social events on Saturday evenings. I’m not suggesting that you do as I do in that regard, but I am suggesting that you should get home early enough to spend some time before the Lord, making sure that your heart is right with Him and praying that He would be honored by our worship as we gather on Sunday.

5. Put away distractions on Sunday mornings and don’t be a distraction to other worshipers.

Don’t read the bulletin during singing or the sermon. If you have a medical condition that requires you to use the restroom during the worship service, sit near the back and on an aisle so you don’t disturb others. If you’re thirsty, you can wait until the service is over to get a drink. If your child is a distraction to others, take him to the nursery or out of the service.

6. Ignore others around you and remember that God is the audience.

There is a balance here. We should feel free to express our love to God outwardly without worrying about what others think of us. David danced before the Lord even though it embarrassed his wife, but God sided with David (2 Sam. 6:14-23). On the other hand, if you’re so demonstrative that you’re distracting others and calling attention to yourself, you’re out of balance. “All things must be done properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Cor. 14:40).

7. Spend time worshiping God in His creation.

If you live in a big city, you’ll have to work harder at this than we who live in beautiful Flagstaff do. But wherever you are, pay attention to what God has made: the night sky with its stars; the sun to warm the day and give light (Ps. 19:1-6); the flowers, the birds, the butterflies, and even the bugs; your body, which is fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14). In Romans 1:18-21, Paul indict ungodly people who have ignored the evidence of the Creator that is all around them in His creation. Their sin was that they did not honor God or give thanks. In other words, they didn’t worship the Creator. But that’s our ultimate priority!
Application Questions

1. What are some ways in which evangelical Christians may worship God falsely? How much cultural freedom is there in true worship?

2. Since true worship is in part a matter of our feelings, how can a Christian who has lost such feelings reignite them?

3. What are some worldly influences that choke out worship in your life? How should you deal with them?

4. Complete this sentence: If truly worshiping God is my priority, my daily schedule must change by ….

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