

The Priority of Worship

January 15, 2017

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things,⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:38-42 (NIV)

Last week was the introduction to our new series, "A Healthy Church is a Well Balanced Church," and I talked about how there are four primary purposes of each and every church: Worship, Mission, Discipleship & Fellowship. For a church to be a healthy church it needs to be well balanced in each of those four areas. This morning we begin by looking at the primary purpose of the primary purposes. Kind of sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? For those that struggle with ambiguity in their lives, the Bible and the Christian spiritual life can be a struggle at times. And I say "Christian spiritual life" because I don't think God intends for there to be any spiritual life apart from a Christian spiritual life.

In one of my devotional readings this past week I came across this quote from a woman by the name of Joan Chittister:

"The spiritual life is a commitment to faith when we would prefer certainty."

That quote speaks to all of us who struggle with ambiguity and tension in our lives. In God's eyes there can be four primary purposes of the church and one of them can be more primary than the others.

If one reads through the Bible from beginning to end, it doesn't take long to discover that worship is the one thing that God desires most from his people. Above all else God desires to be worshiped.

Rory Noland, in his book, *Worship on Earth as it is in Heaven*, defines worship as "the act of expressing love, praise, and adoration to God." Throughout this series we will be recommending one book for each of the four primary purposes. *Worship on Earth as it is in Heaven* by Rory Noland is my recommendation for worship. It is a relatively easy read but packed with good information about what it means to be a good worshiper of God – both privately and corporately.

Worship is not just something we do at certain times, like when we're at home praying, or reading our Bible, or listening or singing Christian worship songs, or coming to church on Sundays. Worship is a lifestyle. Worship is something we do 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Yes, we can even worship God the way we sleep.

By now you should know that Romans 12 is my favorite chapter in all the Bible. That is if God allows us to have favorite chapters? The apostle Paul spends the first eleven chapters of his letter to the early Christians in Rome laying out all God has done for humans throughout history, culminating in the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ to offer salvation for all who believe. And in light of all the God has done, he begins chapter 12 with what is supposed to be our response:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.
Romans 12:1 (NIV)

There it is! There is your true and proper worship. To offer your entire self as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Seems to be rather simple and straight-forward, don't you think? While the concept of it might be fairly easy to grasp, living it out in our lives is quite another thing.

You see, when it comes to worship, we often start in the wrong places. We start with what we do on Sundays or when we gather collectively together to worship. We start with ourselves, our preferences, our likes when worship isn't supposed to be about us at all. It's supposed to be about God.

A contemporary theologian by the name of D.A. Carson writes this about corporate worship, which really emphasizes the importance of our personal worship:

“In the same way that, according to Jesus, you cannot find yourself until you lose yourself, so also you cannot find excellent corporate worship until you stop trying to find excellent corporate worship and pursue God himself. One sometimes wonders if we are beginning to worship *worship* rather than worship *God*. It's a bit like those who begin admiring the sunset and soon begin to admire themselves admiring the sunset.” D.A. Carson, Worship by the Book

The first step to becoming a more vibrant and better worshiper on Sunday is to become a more vibrant and better worshiper Monday through Saturday!

And for those of you who just don't like worship, I have some very bad news for you. Eternity in heaven is a really long time.

The late 20th century Theologian A. W. Tozer put it like this:

“You will be worshiping God long after everything else has ceased to exist. Too bad if you do not learn to worship Him now so that you do not have to cram for the last exam. For my part, I want to worship God in my own private life so fully and satisfyingly to the end so I will not have to cram for the final exam. I can nearly stop breathing with quietness and say, “I worship Him; I am still worshiping Him; and I expect to worship Him for all eternity. That is what we are here for, to glorify God and enjoy Him thoroughly and forever, telling the universe how great God is.”

Undoubtedly, Jesus was the best worshiper of God that we read about in the Bible. How could he not be? We constantly read about him going off to be alone with God the Father, offering prayers, worshiping God in the Temple, quoting the O.T. Scriptures, giving glory to God the Father for everything.

After Jesus, probably the best worshiper who we read about in the Bible was King David. Not only was David a mighty warrior for God, he was a poet and a prolific song writer. Half of the 150 psalms are attributed to David. The Psalms was and still is the song book of the Jewish Scriptures and the Roman Catholic Church. In the Roman Catholic Church the psalms are not to be read, they are to be sung. We don't know what the music sounded like in David's day, but the lyrics have been passed down through the generations. That is why we often use the Psalms for our Call to Worship, they are some of the most deeply passionate and intimate words expressed to God in Scripture, covering the entire range of human emotion. The Bible tells us that David danced, once even without his clothes on, to the dismay of his wife. I'm not suggesting that any of us do that. I think it would bring on a lot more emotion than just dismay, and I fail to see how it might be worshipful to God.

Indeed, the truth is if one reads through the Bible from beginning to end, it doesn't take long to discover that God wants to be worshiped. In the O.T., the record of the Old Covenant between God and His people we find the 10 commandments.

The first four of the Ten Commandments are all about worshiping God:

1. You shall have no other gods before me – that's worship!
2. You shall not make for yourself any graven images or idols – that's worship!
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord – that's worship!
4. You shall remember the Sabbath day, keeping it holy to the Lord your God.
That's worship!

And in the midst of the first four commandments God tells us that He is a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the 3rd and 4th generations of those who hate [or disregard] Him, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Him and keep His commandments (Exodus 20:1-11)

There is no greater evidence of worship than keeping God's commandments!

In the N.T., the record of the New Covenant between God and His people, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well:

“The hour is coming, in fact it is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.”

John 4:23 (ESV)

What does it mean to worship the Father in Spirit?

Without the Holy Spirit's work in our life, we cannot worship God properly. At what point the Holy Spirit takes over a believer is a mystery. In the Acts 2 (v.38) passage, the primary passage from last Sunday Peter says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." But we need the Holy Spirit already working in our life to even come to Jesus. Jesus tells us in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." In John 3:6-8, Jesus tells us that it is "the Spirit (of God) which gives birth to spirit . . . The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

While the Holy Spirit came upon the earliest disciples and apostles in its fullest on the Day of Pentecost, he was able to work in their lives at some level before it. The Holy Spirit was at work in the lives of some people, at some level even during Old Testament times.

The Holy Spirit is that which God places within us which draws us to Him, allows us to recognize our sinfulness and causes us to repent and believe in Jesus. The Holy Spirit comforts us when we need comforting. The Holy Spirit aligns our will with God's will. The Holy Spirit causes us to worship God in the way God desires to be worshiped.

What does it mean to worship God in truth?

John Piper says, "our concern with truth is an inevitable expression of our concern with God. If God does exist and we really believe that God is God, then he is the measure of all things and what he thinks about all things is the measure of what we think."

John Piper, *Solid Joy Devotional*, Jan. 11, 2017

You see, we really can't be passionate about God and not be passionate about truth. How serious is truth in the eyes of God? Well it says in 2 Thessalonians 2:10, "They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved." That's pretty serious!

Ultimately though, when Jesus said the Father is looking for those who will worship Him in truth, He was mostly talking about a person. He was mostly talking about Himself. Jesus, the one who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," was saying, "no one can worship the Father except through Me."

Worship under the New Covenant is always through Christ, in Christ and for Christ. The living Jesus is the embodiment of truth. Anything called truth that in any way contradicts who He is, His character, what He said, and what He did is not truth.

When Jesus said that the Father looks for those who are worshiping Him "in truth," he was tying truth to worship and worship to truth. He was saying that the mind needs to be engaged in the kind of worship that God desires. He was saying that you cannot separate true worship from "truth." You cannot separate true worship from the Word of God – the living Word Jesus and the written Word, the Bible, especially the New Testament.

Which is why it says in our Acts 2 passage that we looked at last week, the story of the early church, “They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.” The apostles teaching would become the New Testament.

Worship is more than just an emotional exercise. When we come to a worship service we don't leave our minds at the door. Just like when we come to a worship service we don't leave our hearts at the door.

The foundation of true worship is the Word of God. No matter how good the songs we sing might sound, or their beat, if they aren't true to the Word of God, they really aren't worship songs.

The Greatest Commandment given to us by Jesus, which is just a repeat of the Jewish Shema found way back in the O.T. (Deuteronomy 6:4) is all about worship and the different elements of it which God requires: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart (that's our emotional center) and with all your soul (that which is the deepest part within us), and with all your mind (that's the thinking part) and with all your strength (our bodies).” Proper worship of God, whether individual or corporate takes all four of those elements into account.

You see, Mary had it right. While Martha was distracted by all the things that can distract us – the preparations, the good works for God, our families, our friends, our jobs, sports teams and on and on and on. Mary chose the one the thing that was needed, the only thing that cannot be taken from us, the love of God. How can we not want to give Him our everything back?