

What the Bible says about

WORSHIP,
OR ...

WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN TO WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH?

“But Daddy, I just don’t want to go to church! It’s no fun. It’s boring!” “Well, I’ve just lost interest. I don’t get anything out of it. It doesn’t do me any good to go anymore.” Have you ever heard something like that from your children or other Christians? Have you ever felt this way? Do you feel this way right now? Is there a spiritual emptiness inside of you that you just can’t fill. Is there something missing in your relationship with God? Do you feel like you’re just “going through the motions” when you go to church? If you can see yourself right now in any of this, let me assure you that those feelings are not unique to you; they are experienced by most, if not all of us, from time to time. But there is a “balm in Gilead” (Jer. 8:22), and that balm is worship in spirit and in truth. When Jesus conversed with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, He revealed to her an eternal truth that every true worshipper of God must understand. He said: “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. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23-24). I believe with all my heart that when we really come to understand what that really means, we will have found the antidote to the spiritual emptiness that we all too often feel in our lives. To do that, however, we must answer three questions.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO WORSHIP?

Until we understand what worship is, the cure for the “worship weariness” that sometimes invades our souls will forever elude us. In his Hebrew-Chaldee lexicon, Gesenius says that the predominant Hebrew word for “worship” (shachah) means: “to bow oneself down, Isa. 51:23....to sink down, to be depressed....to prostrate oneself before any one out of honour....Those who used this mode of salutation fell on their knees and touched the ground with the forehead....” (Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures, pp. 813-814). In their Greek-English lexicon, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker say that the predominant Greek word for “worship” (proskuneo), like the Hebrew, was “used to designate the custom of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, the ground, etc.; the Persians did this in the presence of their deified king, and the Greeks before a divinity or something holy; (fall down and) worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully....” (A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, pp. 716-717). Our English word “worship” is derived from

“the Saxon/Old English word ‘weorthscipe’ or ‘weordhscipe,’ which means ‘worship’ or worthiness. This connotes actions motivated by an attitude that reveres, honors, or describes the worth of another person or object” (ISBE, Vol. 4, pp. 1117-1118).

Do you see the emphasis in all those definitions? It is not on the worshipper but on the One who is worshiped. Worship “is an exercise of the human spirit that is directed primarily to God; it is an enterprise undertaken not simply to satisfy our need or to make us feel better or to minister to our aesthetic taste or social well-being, but to express the worthiness of God Himself...To worship God is to ascribe to Him supreme worth, for He is uniquely worthy to be honored in this way....” (ISBE, Vol. 4 p. 1131). John MacArthur, Jr. is absolutely correct when he says: “That consuming, selfless desire to give to God is the essence and the heart of worship. It begins with the giving first of ourselves, and then of our attitudes, and then of our possessions -- until worship is a way of life” (The Ultimate Priority, p. 14).

The emphasis in true worship is on giving, not receiving. Those who complain that the singing is uninspiring; the sermons are dry, dull, and dusty; and the service is boring, etc. often do so, I’m convinced, because they have missed the fundamental essence of what worship is all about in the first place. I fear that the microwave mentality of our convenience-crazed society has crept into the souls of Christians to such an extent that we want a “fastfood faith” and a “remote-control religion.” Now, I am certainly not defending sloppy singing, sorry sermons, or shabby services, but when it comes to this thing called worship, if we are thinking more about me, myself, and I than we are about God, we have gotten the cart before the horse, and things will never be what they ought to be until we change that.

The emphasis in true worship is on giving the best we have, not the left-overs. All throughout the Old Testament, God demanded the very best from His people: the firstlings of the flock, the firstborn of man and animal, the firstfruit of the harvest. When the site and the sacrifice were offered to David free of charge so that he might appease the wrath of God, because he had presumptuously numbered Israel without God’s approval David said: “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing” (1 Sam. 24:24). The heart that says: “Let’s worship God, but let’s do it as quickly, conveniently, cheaply, and effortlessly as possible” does not understand the very essence of what true worship is all about. If God would not accept “the leftovers” from His people in the days of the prophets (Mal. 1:7-8, 10; cf. Amos 5:21; Hos. 6:4-6; Isa. 1:11-15), He will not accept anything less than the very best that we have to offer Him today.

It is only when we come to realize that worship is a selfless act of giving and when we give selflessly to our God that worship will be the meaningful experience for us that we and God want it to be. This is one of the great paradoxes of the spiritual life. Just as we must lose our life to find it (Mt. 10:39), and hate our life to keep it (Jn. 12:25), and humble ourselves to be exalted (Mt. 23:12), so we must give of ourselves completely and totally to the worship of God to receive abundant spiritual blessings in return. It was Jesus our Lord who said: “Give, and it

will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you” (Lk. 6:38). No wonder Jesus said “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), for it is only in giving that we really can receive. At the end of a worship service, the questions that each of us should ask are not: “Did I enjoy it?” or “Did I get anything out of it?” but rather “Was God pleased?” and “How did I do?” The person, whose primary concern is “What’s in it for me?” (Mal. 3:13-15), does not understand what worship is all about.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO WORSHIP IN SPIRIT?

Since Jesus said that true worshippers will worship God in spirit, it is absolutely imperative that we understand what that means. But before we talk about what it does mean, let’s consider several things that it does not mean.

It does not mean worship that is necessarily “spirited” (i.e. enthusiastic, excited, etc.). I say that because the “mood” of worship will be dependent upon the attitude of the heart. At times the heart will be joyous and excited as was the case when Miriam and the women of Israel worshipped God following their deliverance from the Egyptian army (Ex. 15:20-21). At other times the heart may be sorrowful and subdued as surely must have been the case when David worshipped God following the death of his infant son (2 Sam. 12:19-20). In these two examples of worship, the “mood” was very different, but the worship was acceptable in both cases.

It does not mean worship that is “spiritual” (i.e. better-felt-than told). Nowhere does the Bible depict worship as some kind of mysterious, esoteric, intangible experience that one cannot understand or explain to other people.

It does not mean worship that is miraculously Spirit-inspired. Although the term “spirit” (pneuma) is used in this way in the New Testament (1 Cor. 14:15), Jesus was not using the term like this in His conversation with the Samaritan woman. I know that because all true worshippers must worship in spirit (Jn. 4:24), but even in the first century, when miraculous gifts were available to the church, not all Christians were Spirit-inspired (1 Cor. 12:29-30); therefore, worship in spirit is not some kind of miraculously Spirit-inspired worship.

I believe that worshipping in spirit refers to worship that emanates from the spirit of man. Paul said: “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son....” (Rom. 1:9). Because God is Spirit (Jn. 4:24), the true worshipper will worship God with that part of himself that is made in the image of God -- his spirit. In other words, worship must spring forth from the inner man, and this inner man, the spirit, includes the intellect (1 Cor. 2:11), the emotions (Mk. 8:12; Acts 17:16) and the will (Mt. 26:41).

True worship then is worship from the inside out. In reaction to dull, routine, lifeless, boring worship services, many who yearn for a more meaningful, gratifying religious experience, are crying out that we need more emotion, more feeling in our worship to God. I do not necessarily disagree with that assessment, but there is a real danger in trying to produce with external techniques that which must emanate from the heart. Robert Turner was correct when he said: "Often our efforts to 'improve' the worship are only efforts to regulate the form, and have little or nothing to do with improving the hearts out of which true worship must come. Some react to the 'cold formality' of worship by proposing bizarre emotion-stirring props. What is more 'artificial' than lighting effects, 'mood' music, or tricky little antiphonal songs that force participation upon some person who could not be moved by the love of God. How is the 'hypocrisy of traditional services' helped by providing a better mask -- an emotional screen -- that can not take the place of genuine worship....Improving the worship is part and parcel of the whole job of turning people to God, getting them to partake of the divine nature. It is not the 'service' that needs changing, it is the people that must be changed -- to new creatures, truly converted. These will worship God acceptably" ("?You Know What?," Plain Talk, 9:1:7). To solve the problem of habitual, routine, formalistic, ritualistic, worship with external techniques (gadgets, gimmicks, and games) is to use a Band-Aid when what we really need is open-heart surgery.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO WORSHIP IN TRUTH?

Jesus also said that the true worshipper will worship God in truth. There can be no doubt, that this means that acceptable worship will be circumscribed by the precepts of God's word. When Jesus prayed to the Father on the night of His betrayal, He said: "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17). Since the very beginning of time God has revealed His will concerning the kind of worship that He will accept from His creation, and He has repeatedly judged those who failed to worship Him according to His word. Therefore, the only way that we can acceptably worship God today is to worship Him according to His word.

That means that we must worship the right object -- God, not men (Acts 10:26), not idols (1 Jn. 5:21), not demons (1 Cor. 10:19-22), not angels (Rev. 22:8-9), not Satan. Jesus said: "You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve" (Mt. 4:10).

That means that we must worship in the right form. Jesus condemned the worship of the scribes and Pharisees as vain, because they taught the precepts of men as though they were the doctrine of God (Mt. 15:7-9). Paul described the worship of some at Colossae as "will-worship," because they were basing it upon the philosophies and traditions of men (Col. 2:8-10, 16-23).

When we come to truly understand what it really means to worship...God...with our spirits...in truth, above everything else God will be pleased, and that is the most important thing, but our lives will also be transformed. May God help us all to be the true worshippers who will worship in spirit and in truth.

Kevin S. Kay
8511 Thompson Rd.
Highlands, TX 77562
(713) 426-3944
kaykevin@aol.com