

What True Worship Requires (John 4:15-29)

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One of the more unfortunate terms in Christian circles in recent decades is the notion of “worship wars.” You have one group of folks who likes to sing hymns with traditional accompaniment. You have another group of folks who like to sing modern choruses with a contemporary band.

The first group believes their worship is theologically rich, rooted in the well of church history. To them, contemporary worship feels like the emotive ramblings of a skinny jeans crowd that turns the music up way too loud and the lights down way too low. The second group believes their worship is emotionally authentic, rooted in our present experience of God. To them, traditional worship feels sterile, intellectual, and as in touch with real life as their grandparents are with a smartphone.

A “worship war” arises when both groups try to exert their influence in a particular local church and the outcome is sadly predictable. Either the church splits with the old people forming one congregation and the young people forming a different congregation. Or you opt for different services catering to different congregants.

In either case, the unity of the church takes a big hit, compromising our witness to the power of the gospel and undermining the multi-generational help we desperately need to follow Jesus. The watching world naturally concludes what binds us together isn’t Jesus. It’s our musical tastes and preferences. That’s really sad.

But there’s another danger to the “worship wars” that lurks beneath the surface. It’s the assumption in both positions that worship is primarily about what we sing. Singing is certainly a biblical expression of worship. However, the concept of worship involves immeasurably more than singing. Rom 12:1, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

God is after more than your voice for a few brief minutes on Sunday morning. He wants you to surrender your “body,” your entire self. Worshiping God means pleasing him with all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, no time off.

Teaching us to worship God in this all-of-life sense is what John 4 is all about. **No matter who you are or what you’ve done, Jesus is eager to satisfy your soul with the joy of worshipping the Father in the power of the Spirit.** And he accomplishes

that work in our hearts through a series of actions, each of which marks off a different scene in the story and challenges us with a corresponding question. There are at least five of them in Jn 4. We looked at the first two last Sunday. **First, Jesus takes initiative:** will you embrace the Savior who shatters social boundaries? **Second, Jesus extends an offer:** will you ask Jesus for the life he alone provides?

The people and pleasures of this world are good gifts, but they are not God. Only he can satisfy your soul. Enjoying a growing relationship with him, Jesus says, is like drinking from a fountain of living water. It's what he offers the Samaritan woman in vv. 13-14. At this point, however, she's still thinking of water in a purely physical sense. She has yet to perceive her deeper spiritual need. So she replies in v. 15, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

We do the exact same thing whenever we come to Jesus thinking he will make our life in this world a little easier. Physical health? Material wealth? A sense of purpose and belonging? Sign me up, Jesus! Who wouldn't want in on that? The problem, friends, is that what we naturally want from Jesus is not what we actually need from Jesus.

SCENE 3: JESUS IDENTIFIES A REQUIREMENT

Will you confess the depth of your need for a Savior?

Let's say you're not aware of any major problems with your heart. You think you're completely healthy. If I handed you a bottle of blood thinning medication after church today and said, "Here's a gift for you," how would you respond? You'd probably say, "Oh thank you, pastor. That's so kind of you." And promptly stash the bottle wherever you keep all the socks, underwear, and other "gifts" your grandmother gives you at Christmas.

But what if you had an EKG earlier this week and your doctor informed you there's a major blockage in one of your arteries and that you need to get on blood thinners as soon as possible. Would that knowledge, that awareness of your need, change the way you value my gift of medication? Absolutely.

Friend, unless you recognize and confess your need for a Savior, you will neither perceive nor experience Jesus as the precious gift that he is. What Jesus says of the Samaritan woman in v. 10 could easily be said of us. We don't know "the gift of God," we don't perceive the goodness of Jesus, because we've forgotten the reason we need him in the first place. So Jesus lovingly does for us the same thing he did for the Samaritan woman. He opens our eyes to see the depth of our need.

V. 16, "Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come here.'" It seems like a strange request, doesn't it? Except he knows something we don't, at least not initially. He knows what's really wrong with this woman and is willing to open the most personal and uncomfortable doors in her heart to help her recognize the same.

Her initial reply is understandably evasive. It's what we all do when the Lord (or someone who has the courage to speak on his behalf) knocks on a door we would rather keep closed. V. 17, "The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.'" Just enough truth to avoid lying, but still holding back the whole story. And then Jesus drops the hammer with gentle firmness of a master surgeon of the soul. "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true."

What's he doing? He's shining the light on the shame of her broken relationships and sexual immorality. He's pinpointing the area of her life that most reveals how far she's wandered down the path of disobedience to God's commands. He's bringing into the light what she tried to keep in the dark.

Why? Because Jesus loves her and she needs the forgiveness and deliverance from sin and shame he alone can provide. It's why he came to earth in the first place and suffered the pain of crucifixion, crushed under the judgment of God her sin deserved.

Why do you think you most need from Jesus, friend? Jesus, give me a job. Jesus, give me better behaved kids. Jesus, give me a peaceful marriage. Jesus, give me a spouse. Affirm me. Bless me. Reduce my stress level. Make my life easy. Do something so I don't have to keep coming to this well and draw water every day.

That's not why you need Jesus, friend. Here's why you need Jesus. Rom 3:10–12, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

You don't need a divine errand boy. You need a Savior. You need a Redeemer. You need a Mediator between God and man who can reconcile you to the creator and lover of your soul. You need a Conquering King who can shatter the hardness of your heart with the power of his sacrificial love and rescue you from willful slavery to sin and death. You need a Lord of Life who can sanctify and satisfy the deepest longings of your soul and give you eternal joy. That's what you need and that's exactly who Jesus is.

He knows what you've done. He knows what you're doing. All that he requires is that you humble yourself, confess your sin, and cry out to him for salvation. Jesus, I need a

Savior. Jesus, I trust you as my Savior. Say that right now, friend. Say that tomorrow morning. Say that every day of your life until the Lord calls you home. Rom 10:13, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Experiencing the satisfaction of soul Jesus is eager to give you starts with confessing the true depth of your need for him, acknowledging the specific areas of your life where you have worshiped someone or something else other than him. In the Samaritan woman's case, it was her relationships with men. What is it for you, friend?

SCENE 4: JESUS EXPLAINS THE GOAL

Will you practice the true worship God seeks?

Best case scenario the woman's reply in v. 19 expresses the beginning of genuine faith, a new trust that the man speaking to her is categorically different from the sort of men she has known before. Or she could simply be changing the subject because the conviction of sin she was experiencing felt too uncomfortable.

"Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." It was one of the most significant religious debates of her day. What does true worship look like? What form of worship does God require of us? The Samaritans believed you should worship God on Mt. Gezirim. The Jews believed you should worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus gives her two answers. **First, he says the Jews were right about worshipping God in Jerusalem up to this point. Second, he says the real answer to her question at this moment isn't A or B. It's "C," none of the above.** Why? Because an "hour" is coming, referring to his imminent death and resurrection, when the kind of worship that pleases God will not be a matter of coming to the right geographic location. Rather, it will be a matter of worshipping "in spirit and truth" (v. 23).

Explanations abound for what Jesus means, including some who say "in spirit" refers to contemporary, heart-felt songs and "in truth" refers to theologically rich hymns. Suffice it to say, that's not what Jesus is doing. He's not resolving our worship wars by saying the right answer is "both." He's saying we're focused on the wrong issue. The essence of genuine worship, true worship, isn't a musical thing. It's a spirit and truth thing.

What does that mean? In the Gospel of John, "spirit" consistently refers not to the human soul or spirit, but to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead. V. 24 confirms that's the right interpretive direction because John reminds us "God is spirit." His essence lies not in the physical realm but in the spiritual realm.



Therefore, if you're going to worship God, it won't happen by conforming your life to a list of physical behaviors by the force of your will. Go to church. Read your Bible. Be a good person. No. That was the Samaritan woman's problem. In her mind, worshiping God was about external, religious ceremonies like visiting the right temple. Jesus points her in a completely different direction. Worshiping God, because he is spirit, starts with something that happens inside of you, something that begins in the spiritual realm, not the physical realm.

That something is a regenerating work of the Spirit of God. He takes our hearts that are spiritually dead, blind and cold to the goodness of God and imparts within us the gift of spiritual life, including the ability to see the reality of our sin and trust Jesus to deliver us from sin. Then Spirit literally takes up residence within us, empowering us to worship God by living in a way that pleases him. We can't do it unless the Father and Son pour out the gift of the Spirit upon us.

Rom 8:8–10, 13, "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin (who we are in and of ourselves), the Spirit is life because of righteousness...For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

True worship must be "in spirit" because it means living for God by the power of the Spirit in every area of life. It's what the Samaritan woman was missing. She wasn't demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit. She was demonstrating the fruit of the flesh.

It's why Jesus flagged her sexual immorality in the first place. His goal wasn't to shame her into cleaning up her life. It was to open her eyes to see how far she fell short of worshiping God in the way he requires and just how much she needed Jesus to change her heart through the indwelling power of the Spirit. Her sexual sin revealed she was spiritually dead and needed Jesus to make her alive.

We need the exact same thing, friends. We need the power of the Spirit so that we can worship God from the inside out. To give us a new orientation of heart that wants to please God. If you're not a Christian, don't try to "make" yourself a Christian. Ask Jesus to change your heart by the power of the Spirit, giving you a new will and desire to follow him. And if you are a Christian, don't try to "make" yourself obey Jesus through the mere force of your will. Ask the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of the Spirit in your life. Depend on his help, not your own ability. We must worship God "in spirit," in an inside-out, Spirit-empowered way.

Feeling a sense of “release” or “permission” from the Spirit to do something, however, is not sufficient for determining whether the Father is pleased with our actions. Yes, true worship must be “in spirit,” but it must also be “in truth.” Time and again, when John refers to the truth, he speaks of God’s character and ways as revealed in the person and work of his Son, Jesus.

Jn 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Jn 14:6, “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life.’” If you want to know what is true, who God really is and the kind of human acts, attitudes, and nature that are consistent with who he is, look at Jesus. Don’t take an opinion poll from your friends. Listen to Jesus.

To worship the Father “in truth,” means we worship God in accordance with who Jesus is and in keeping with what Jesus says. For example, it means obeying God’s Word not to earn his favor, but because of the favor he has already lavished on us in Jesus. It means when we’re trying to decide what sort of actions will please the Lord, we look first to the words and example of Jesus, not our own thoughts or feelings, to determine what is true and right. It means worshiping the Father by treasuring Jesus, the one in whom he has most fully revealed himself, more than anything else in our life.

The Samaritan woman lacked this sort of worship as well. She wasn’t worshiping God “in truth,” living according to commands of Christ, surrendering her sexual desires to God’s holy law. She was a law unto herself. If she felt like it, she did it. If she wanted it, she took it. Worshiping the Father “in truth” means living a life that is Christ-centered, not self-centered. **Spirit-empowered. Christ-centered. That’s the kind of worship the Father is seeking.**

And it’s not two kinds. It’s one. For the Spirit bears witness to the Son. The woman’s response to Jesus in v. 25 suggests a mixture of agreement, uncertainty, and longing. “I know that Messiah (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.”

She doesn’t know when. She doesn’t know how. All she knows and readily confesses to the man in front of her is that understanding and experiencing the sort of worship Jesus is talking about requires the person and work of the Messiah, the Anointed One, whom Jews and Samaritans alike believed would come one day and bring all the purposes of God to pass.

She was absolutely right. She needed a Savior. So do we, friends. Worship in spirit and truth is impossible otherwise. What she didn’t know is that he was literally standing in front of her. V. 26, “Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he.’”

Woman, you need a Savior and I am that Savior. I'm the only one who can satisfy your soul by giving you the joy of worshiping the Father in the power of the Spirit. A mustard seed of faith rises in her heart in response. She leaves her water jar, a symbol of life devoted to satisfying her physical desires, and runs into town with a breathless invitation. V. 29. "Come, and see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"

CONCLUSION

Her symbolic repentance and confession of awe-filled wonder at Jesus points to the beginning of a genuine work of salvation in her heart. The questions Jesus implicitly posed to her in their conversation were becoming clear. Will you confess the depth of your need for a Savior? Will you practice the true worship God seeks? She was well on her way to answering both with a resounding "yes."

Will you, friend? You'll never know the joy God created you to experience in him unless you do. Jesus is eager to satisfy your soul with the joy of worshiping the Father in the power of the Spirit. Don't wait. Don't hesitate. Don't tell yourself you can work through all this spiritual stuff later. Confess the depth of your need. Acknowledge you can't worship God in the way he requires apart from his work in your heart. Ask him to forgive you. Ask him to fill you with the Spirit. Ask him to enable you to practice the true worship God requires.

The Father is seeking. The Son is able. The Spirit is willing. It's all possible because of the gospel, the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The satisfying splendor of his person and work is what makes true worship possible. So come to him and drink. Cry out to him by faith. Let him satisfy your soul that you might never be thirsty again.