

Worship (7) The Secret of Worship (2) – In Spirit and In Truth

What is the secret of worship? We saw last week that the most basic secret of worship is that we must be born again. God must give us an appetite for Himself before we can enjoy the light of His glory.

But once we have that prerequisite of being born again in place – we must ask – ‘What is the secret of worship for a believer?’ In the Gospel of John we find perhaps the clearest, and perhaps the most misunderstood, statement on the secret of worship in a believer’s life.

Jesus is passing through Samaria on the way back north to Galilee. He has chosen to take this route; most Galileans went around Samaria. He sends the disciples off to get food. Samaritans and Jews were hostile to one another. Samaritans were offspring of the people in the Northern Kingdom who intermarried with Assyrians who lived nearby.

A woman comes to draw water from the well – an unusual time to come – she was probably ostracised by others. Jesus strikes up a conversation. This was shocking for two reasons – one, that he was a man speaking to a woman, treating her like an equal, and, two, that he was a Jew speaking to a Samaritan. Jesus seeks to take this matter of needing a drink of water into the spiritual realm. He points out that she is needier than He is, and, if she understood her need and His Person, she would be asking Him; not the other way around. Jesus promises her this kind of water, and then begins to focus on her sin. He tells her to call her husband, and she tells a half-truth, which He then exposes. She realises He has supernatural knowledge about her.

She is trapped, and as a trapped sinner will do, she tries to divert the conversation onto something more general – in this case the dispute about worship between Samaritans and Jews. Jesus follows His prey into the bush, so to speak, for He is after her soul. And He captures it, for she comes to faith in Him. It is in this context, of her trying to almost divert attention from her sin, that Jesus speaks perhaps the most important words on worship in all of the New Testament:

John 4:21-24 *Jesus saith unto her, “Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”*

Here is our Lord’s statement of the secret of worship for a believer – *God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth.*

What does that mean?

Taking these verses in context, the answer seems to be that Jesus is describing the secret of worship in two ways: the manner of worship – how or where it happens; and the material of worship - what it is based on.

Let's take those two and seek to understand what the Lord meant:

You Must Worship God in Spirit to be a True Worshipper

The simplest way to understand this is to realise Jesus was correcting a false teaching. The Samaritans thought Mt. Gerizim was the place to worship God, as opposed to Jerusalem. Jesus turns that on its head by basically saying – 'Worship isn't localised.' Worship doesn't happen just at a place. The reason for that is that God is never just at one place.

Remember when Solomon dedicated the Temple, he said :

1 Kings 8:27 *But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have built!*

In other words – God is a spirit. Being a spirit, He does not have a body. He does not have size. He is not restricted to a place. He is omnipresent. He is invisible to physical eyes.

Real worship doesn't happen in a location; it happens in your soul.

Worship must be something you do in your spirit, because that is who God is. We are to spiritually worship Him for He is a spirit.

Worship is not to be a purely external act – going to a particular place, doing a particular thing, without anything happening internally.

Jews of Jesus' day had become formalists. Everything was about being at the right place; wearing the right clothes, eating the right food, presenting the right sacrifice, making sure you were circumcised, ritually clean, and so on.

Their worship was not internal to them, it was external. If you consider the controversies that Jesus had with the religious leaders of His time; they were essentially all disputes about the internal vs. the external; the spirit of the Sabbath vs. the letter, eating with unwashed hands, and so on. Jesus was trying to say that worship cannot merely be the externals; it must take place in the heart.

Matt. 15:8-9 *'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honour Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'*

Paul said the same thing about the legalists of his day who sought circumcision for everyone:

Phil. 3:3 *For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh,*

This can be illustrated in traditionalism; singing hymns with no purpose, feeling, thought, going through the motions; 'doing church'. Anytime you begin to treat worship like a favour you are doing God, or something you just need to do, you are entering into false worship, because it isn't worship in spirit.

Acts 17:25 *Nor is He worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.*

Worship is not to be a purely mental act. Worship is not just gathering facts about God into this huge database, becoming an ever-bulging Bible-trivia whiz. To know all about God or the things of God is not the same thing as knowing God.

It is not to be a purely mental affair. God cannot be known by purely gathering facts about Him.

An example of this would be the religious Jews of Jesus' time - they had become extremely rational and cerebral. Religion had become about studying the Law, dividing up the words and arguing about their possible applications to the nth degree. Their whole religion was rigidly literal, and they could never find the spirit of The Law, because they had become so completely reliant on their own mental powers, that it was no longer spiritual.

Much 'worship' today thinks that pure systematic theology will be the equivalent of worship. Many think that beefing up on doctrine, arguing over the finer points of theology, spending much time reading about the things of God, qualifies as worship. But it doesn't. Doctrine and theology are absolutely crucial, but men or women who make the mental accumulation and analysis of theological facts their idea of worship become proud, hard and ultimately somewhat dead to real worship. Praising God seems dull; they want to get back to debating ideas and arguing theology.

Worship in spirit is not merely external, it is not merely intellectual. But there's a third area that this idea counters. If true worship is to be spiritual then

Worship is not to be a purely sensual affair. Now that word *sensual* has evil connotations, but I am using it to simply refer to the senses – sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell. Because God is a Spirit, the worship of God will not come primarily through your physical senses. God, as a Spirit, cannot be pictured, heard, felt by the physical senses, except in extraordinary circumstances when He allows it. Worship is not to seek to know Him primarily through those – but to know Him in the Spirit.

Now I will state the obvious – you have to use your senses – you must use your eyes to read, to see beauty, you must use your ears to hear the Word and listen to music, but that is different from wanting to experience God sensually.

Much 'worship' today seeks to bring God into the realm of sensory experience. It claims visions, apparitions of God; it makes pictures of God to look at and encourages visualising God; it claims God speaks audibly to it; it seeks physical experiences where God knocks you over or sends electric-like shocks through your body. And in these circles, the more physical the experience, the more spiritual they feel! How ironic!

Now worship involves the body, worship involves the mind, worship involves external acts. But if some or all of those things is *all* you have, then it is not true worship. True worship is deeper than that. It is in your spirit.

What does that mean?

Spirit is the highest part of you. And it is where worship happens. Animals have a body, but they cannot worship. Animals have limited mental abilities, to learn, understand; limited emotions, limited will. But they do not have the spirit which is aware of itself, aware of God, and able to adore God. This is the primary meaning of having been made in the image of God.

Gen 2:7 *And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*

Your spirit is who you are – it is more than your life force; it is your personality, your nature.

Your spirit is what goes to heaven or hell when you die.
The spirit is the point of contact between God and you.
We are to engage, apprehend, and adore God in the spiritual realm .

We've said worship is magnifying the glory of God through the lens of our entire being, with other believers. The glory of God does not reach the intellect by itself and pass through magnified. The light of God's glory comes to us in the form of truth. For this light to do anything but bounce off us, it must be received in our spirit.

Our flesh is opaque, solid, when it comes to receiving the light of God's glory. It must be received in the spirit, and then worked out into our total being.

That raises the important question – if true worship takes place in the highest, deepest part of us, how does that happen? How does God as a Spirit engage with us spirit beings so that we can worship Him?

Then answer is – the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives. The Holy Spirit's primary ministry is to reveal the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ to our spirits, if we are but receptive enough to receive His ministry (**I Cor 2:9-13**).

Here is a real mystery – but a glorious one. The Holy Spirit perfectly penetrates our spirits, without obliterating them. And the more we yield to Him, the more He can communicate to us the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ – directly to our spirit. He uses means – He uses the mind, the emotions, the will, but they are to combine until what He gives us is perceived by our spirit. The highest worship reaches where the intellect cannot go, where even the emotions fail – we are overawed, we are astonished, lost in wonder and praise.

Therefore, God's Spirit is always indispensable for our worship of God. To worship God in spirit, we need the Spirit.

The remaining few secrets of worship we will look at are all works of the Spirit in conjunction with the truth.

He takes the light of God's glory and makes it known to our spirit by illumination.
He does the work of assuring us so we are willing and bold enough to approach God.

He does the work of sanctifying us so we can worship in the beauty of holiness. He does the work of reshaping our understanding of what is good and true and noble and beautiful and excellent, so that we will better realise the beauty of God.

The Holy Spirit is the projector, our spirit is the screen.

Worship takes place in your spirit by the Spirit.

We have a responsibility – Eph 5:18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.

We can suggest an analogy with drinking by contrast/comparison. Imbibe wine and yield to its influence and it changes you. So as you yield to the control of the Spirit all through your life; continually yield to His Lordship; allow His influence to be more and more pervasive in your life – the immediate result is musical praise and thanksgiving.

‘In Truth’ - The Material

If the Jews needed to learn that true worship was in spirit, the Samaritans needed to learn that true worship is in truth. The manner must be internal, spiritual; not merely intellectual, formal or sensual. But that manner is meaningless unless it is based on something true.

This is the material – the fuel of worship, so to speak, it is what the spirit receives and rejoices in.

The Samaritans worshipped in spirit. From what we understand, Samaritan worship was enthusiastic, aggressive, excited and emotional. They were not simply formalists. It wasn't purely intellectual.

But Jesus says, “*Ye worship ye know not what*”. It was not based on truth. Samaritans rejected all of the Old Testament and revised 5 books of Moses. They changed Biblical absolutes. They still had worship, but it was no longer true worship.

Now true worship is regulated by, and centred, on truth.

Much discussion about worship today goes nowhere, because of our post-modern attitude of saying “But I like this, or this works for me – therefore, it is true.” I become the authority. Or “I felt such and such an emotion when that was played or sung or said. I had such and such an experience”. And little time is taken to check if that experience, or if that preference or that attitude, is rooted in truth.

Something doesn't become true because we like it or it works; it is either true or it isn't.

Much ‘worship’ today consists of finding an emotion, trying to enter into it, and then bringing in God as the supposed cause of that emotion. But the emotion is the end, God is just the means.

Many people worship their worship.

God's glory is a fixed absolute.

That means *it 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 in worshipping God when we search out the truth.

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

It 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.

Jesus told us where the truth resides:

John 17:17 – *Thy Word is Truth.*

God's Word is the guide for all the truth which the Spirit will use as fuel to show us the glory of God. God's Word is the guide to regulate our worship – to tell us what is acceptable and what is not.

When you think about it, everything we do individually and corporately is to be controlled by, and informed by, the Word of God.

Our meeting is regulated by Scripture. Our songs sing Scripture, or the truth of Scripture. Our prayers are to be informed by Scripture. Scripture even teaches us how to pray. Our preaching is an exposition of Scripture. Scripture teaches us how to preach. Our giving is according to Scripture. Our testimonies are to accord with Scriptural experience. Our organisation; our ordinances, come out of Scripture.

Worship is a rational response to truth - **Romans 12:1** – *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*

Now notice a marvellous parallel passage to the one we read earlier and see the beautiful harmony of God's Word:

Our responsibility –

Col 3:16 *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*

Ephesians 5:18 said – *be filled with the Spirit*. There is 'worshipping God in spirit'. This says, *let the Word of Christ dwell richly in you* – this is worshipping Him in truth. And notice how the results are the same; because the two are inseparable.

Literally – 'Give God's Word a generous place in your life' – let it be saturated into your life, welcomed in, and given a central place in your life. Let truth about God, His nature, His will, His purposes be your living bread.

The more truth fuel you have, the more the Spirit can burn it in your heart, illuminating it and revealing God's glory to your Spirit.

The Spirit cannot illuminate nothing; He illuminates truth.

So, sadly, you have two poles in the church today. You have those who major on spirit. Everything is about supposedly spiritual experiences, emotional experiences, but their experiences are not guided by, or verified by, or judged by, the truth. Inevitably, they are led into false teaching, and often sensuality and immorality.

You have those who major on truth. Everything is about right doctrine, right theology; exposing false doctrine – but there is no right feeling, no passion, no love for Christ, no delight in Him or one another. Everything is intellectual, cold, removed and far from worshipping in spirit. Some of these are also in love with their traditions and forms, and external acts.

Jesus came to exemplify, teach, and then make possible, by His death and resurrection, worship in spirit and in truth. We are to so cooperate with the Holy Spirit that He reveals God to our spirits, and does His work of illumination and assurance and sanctification.

We are to so be in the Word of God that He has much to work with, much to reveal to us. We cannot be led astray, or be led into false worship, because we are guarded and guided by truth.

God wants both head and heart.

So in short, Be Spirit-Filled and be Word-Saturated, if you want to worship God in a way that He accepts.