

## Worship (12) The Secret of Worship (7) Approving what is Excellent/ Shaping the Religious Imagination

Six secrets:

- [ Regeneration.
- [ Worshipping in Spirit and in truth.
- [ Illumination.
- [ Assurance of salvation.
- [ Holiness.
- [ Rooted and grounded in love.

**Phil 1:9-10** *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; <sup>10</sup> That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ;*

Let's try and imagine that every meal from the time you could take in solids till adulthood was from McDonalds - breakfast, lunch and supper. And not only did you only eat the food, you always ate it in McDonalds, with their plastic chairs, people in strange hats, some R and B radio station playing in the background, people serving you and the queue behind you, giving you your food in cardboard boxes placed on a plastic tray. Now imagine this was the only way you ever ate food, and the only way you were aware of how you could eat food. Then, you are in church one day and you hear "Blessed *are* they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb." What will you imagine the marriage supper of the Lamb to be like? What will you think the food will be like, or the décor, or the atmosphere, or the music, or the people serving you. If all you know is McDonalds, you will be profoundly limited and even damaged in your ability to understand and imagine what the Word of God means when it says the marriage supper of the Lamb.

In the same way, if your culture has so warped your understanding of what is good and true and noble and beautiful and excellent, you will be damaged and limited when you hear that Jesus Christ is beautiful and excellent. Your worship will be either warped completely, or very severely limited.

When a man has chewed tobacco to the point where a steak no longer sounds good to him, his values have become inverted – and he is in a bad state. He loves what is unlovable, he dislikes what is enjoyable. And when our appetites have become so inverted that we find rock beautiful, and Bach boring, gangsta rap pleasing and the Psalms boring, a Hollywood blockbuster entertaining and the biblical narratives tiresome – we have been profoundly damaged.

What are we talking about? We are talking about what used to be called the affections. We are talking about what used to be called *ordinate* loves. Our whole understanding of what ought to be loved and in what proportion. Our sense of ordinate loves.

This is the command we find in **Philippians 1:9-10**. Paul wants us to do some things so that we will continually prove or test what is excellent, what is valuable and worthy of praise. Because if we don't grow in this, we will praise and worship what is unlovely, and leave God's glory and beauty un-admired. We will turn up our noses at the gourmet meal offered to us and turn back to our McDonalds.

You can work on all the other six secrets of worship, but if your affections – that is how you think and feel - are still being shaped by this world and by pop culture, worship will be a very unfulfilling experience for you. Your sentiment is going to shape what you find good and

upright and pleasing about God Himself. And if you do not allow your sentiment to be shaped by God's Word, your expectations will be McDonalds, and the gourmet meal will confuse you, challenge you and probably turn you off, unless you grow into it.

What we find beautiful and moving, and even entertaining, is rooted in our spiritual life.

Paul is writing to the Philippians, and after some greetings he launches right into a prayer. His prayer is that the Philippians will grow in their love – they will super-abound in love. Abound in love for whom? Love for God, love for one another, love for their neighbour – love for all things good and true and upright. But God does not want their love to be like a loose cannon, or a river without banks. So he wants their love to grow in knowledge and in discernment. This will result in being able to know what is excellent – what is worthy of love – what they ought to love, and in what proportion they ought to love it.

When we say 'Love', we can mean very different things. We can talk about an athlete loving victory, a child loving ice cream, a miser loving money, a criminal loving getting away with it, a bride loving her groom. In each case we mean very different things by love. Now if our sentiment is to grow to where we are fit to worship, we must understand what it means to 'love' God. In what way do we love God? Like a child loves an ice cream? Like a person loves their pet? When our love is guided by discernment and knowledge we understand who it is we love; and therefore how we are to love Him.

Love is supposed to be in proportion to the objects loved.

You meet people who on first glance are the most open, generous people you've ever met. They seem to love everyone. But after speaking to them, you find that they love everything, indiscriminately. And someone who loves what is unlovable makes their love worthless.

So this is a very important aspect of our lives – it will shape our worship, and can direct the whole course of our moral lives.

So I want us to see some thoughts from this passage and then let's draw out some implications for our everyday lives.

### **I. Paul regarded what is excellent as an real and measurable standard (v10)**

He says – *that you may approve what is excellent*. The word *excellent* is sometimes translated 'better', sometimes translated 'more valuable', sometimes it is translated 'different'. In other words, the word carries the idea of distinction – of being able to see one thing is better than another. One thing is more valuable than another. One thing is worthier than another. One thing is more beautiful than another.

And the Bible is confident that God is behind this because this is a prayer.

Now all of this would be impossible if in fact, 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'.

For instance, is something beautiful because you like it, or is it beautiful regardless of whether or not you like it. The Bible is saying that excellence, as far as God is concerned, is something objectively real.

Now that is news to Christians drowning in relativism. Music is beautiful if I like it. Architecture is beautiful if I like it. Dress is beautiful if I like it. And our culture keeps feeding us this – if it's beautiful to you, then it's beautiful to you, and that's all that matters. You can shape your own sentiment.

But here's the problem. What if you were shown the glory of God, and because of your sensibilities, you didn't think He was beautiful? Would that mean God simply isn't beautiful – *to you*?

You see, beauty, excellence, things that are praiseworthy, are in fact absolutes as far as God is concerned. Now we might have differing tastes. And those tastes might be over trivial things which do not affect us morally. But when our tastes do not have a taste for what God says is beautiful – then we have to strive to change our tastes to delight in what God says is beautiful.

Drop down to chapter 4:8, and it becomes even more obvious.

**Phil 4:8** *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

The Bible is clear that there are things that are pure, that are lovely, that are commendable, that are excellent, and that are praiseworthy. Not just pure to me, or praiseworthy to me, or lovely to me. No, *truly* lovely; *universally* praiseworthy; commendable by nature of what it is, not because of how you and I feel about it; excellent in terms of how God has made it, not in terms of how it is received.

This becomes extremely relevant in the debate about music in worship. If God is to be worshipped by what is beautiful and upright and noble, then this command alone suggests we are to make a distinction musically between what is superior and what is inferior. It suggests that there is music which is excellent, and music which isn't. And if we approve of what isn't excellent – we are damaging our ability to know and enjoy God as excellent.

## 2. Approving what is excellent is not automatic but a growth process

Approve = 'test, see if genuine, scrutinise'

Paul has prayed that God would graciously allow this to happen. At the same time, he tells the Philippians of his prayer – to provoke them to head in the direction of his prayer. The bottom line is, Paul, and therefore the Holy Spirit, did not believe that we would automatically approve of what is excellent.

Our sentiment – how we think and feel, what we regard as enjoyable and entertaining and excellent, is being continually shaped.

**Romans 12:2** is a case in point. *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

Paul says – do not let the world shape you – literally, squeeze you into its mould. Since you are like clay – don't be moulded after the thinking and patterns of the world system. Rather be transformed from within – by the renewing of your mind. If you do so – you will prove, or test, what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. It's the same idea – in other words, your sentiment is always being shaped, one way or the other.

Let's take an extreme example. How does someone end up with a taste for perverted sexuality? The fact is, they don't wake up one day and just find themselves doing what God calls 'against nature' and 'committing what is shameful'. **Romans 1** is a fascinating study in how sentiment is shaped. Man did not desire God; he kept rejecting the revelation of God; he kept saying 'No' to God, and what was it doing all along? It was warping the tastes of

mankind. It was re-shaping their idea of what is lovely and enjoyable and good - until God released them, and they now found pleasure in homosexuality. There was not reluctance, but a genuine, desirous, burning, lust for people of the same sex.

So – how do we shape our sentiment to approve the things that are excellent, to know and love what is true and noble and just and pure and lovely and commendable and excellent and praiseworthy?

### *Be Serious About the Renewing of Your Mind*

The primary place we have our sentiment renewed and repaired is in the Scripture. The Word of God is what renews our minds as the Spirit of God takes it and illuminates it. We must be taking in the Word more than we take in the world. Sadly, for many Christians, the single biggest shaping force of sentiment is the television. TV tells us what we should laugh at, what we should find entertaining, what is funny, what is honourable, what is beautiful. And if you uncritically take in TV, and allow its ideas and ads and attitudes to become yours, your sentiment will be misshapen. It is not just the content of television. It is not just what you watch. It is the attitudes it shapes within you – a desire for everything to be instant, a continual need to be distracted, everything kept on a somewhat trivial, entertaining level. And if you are not careful, you will want your religion like that. Not too serious, fairly entertaining, pretty much continual distraction and diversion, and illumination and assurance and holiness must be instant.

A Christian is to be in the Word the way a stone is before a sculptor – allowing it to chisel, chip, sand and polish the shape of our affections.

### *Be Serious About Shaping Your Religious Imagination*

Some get nervous by the term religious imagination. What we mean by that is our very concepts of beauty and nobility and purity and truth. Here is where our McDonald's illustration comes in again. A failure to have your culinary imagination informed by anything but fast food will demean your mind's concept of the marriage supper of the Lamb, and therefore of your very worship of God. And if your concepts of what is good, valuable, praiseworthy, excellent, noble, upright, lovely is shaped by Ricki Lake, Oprah, rap music, Cosmopolitan, and greedy televangelists, you are going to have a problem.

The Bible says every good gift comes from above. God has gifted man with glorious things that shape our religious imagination when used rightly, or which warp it when abused. They are such things as music, poetry, literature, art and even the enjoyment of nature itself. The church has a massive heritage of some of the finest music, hymnody, poetry, art which can only increase our depth of perception of what is excellent. For about 150 years now, the church has been rejecting this heritage in favour of what the unsaved masses enjoy, to supposedly bait them into our churches. A huge heritage of either directly Christian works of art, or works which emerged from a culture informed by Christianity, is still available to inform, inspire and delight the hearts of worshippers. No one is calling on us to be experts in high culture. But we are called on to leave the pigs husks of pop culture and dine with the Father, since His best gifts are still readily available. Indeed, even unsaved men of past generations have, by God's providence bequeathed us treasures of literature and poetry which edify the soul instead of demeaning it. A Christian serious about understanding the marriage supper of the Lamb metaphor will fight to break free of the triviality, banality and shallow nature of current entertainment and find his joy in what truly is true, pure, just, lovely, noble, excellent, praiseworthy.

Consider, Christian, how you spend your leisure time. Does your soul fly to what is beautiful and excellent, or does it sink back into the putrid hole of the world's DVDs, videos, MTV

abominations or Hollywood slime? Do you find refuge in trivial pastimes, or in refreshing ones? What you do for leisure already reveals your tastes. And what you turn to will either strengthen those tastes, or create new ones.

If you have never considered deepening your understanding of what beautiful music or art or poetry or hymnody is, then please do not defend the travesties occurring today in the house of God. Spend time asking God to reshape your sentiment with the good gifts that have come from above – the best of the humanities.

### *Be Serious About Meaning*

In a world where very little sobriety remains, believers are, of all people, to be serious about meaning. That is, we are to consider the many ways in which all of life communicates meaning. Our very culture is continually stating and restating its idea of life – what is it all about, what we live for, who we are. Thus, a Christian who desires to have their sentiment shaped must consider the manifold meaning communicated everyday by how we dress, and for what occasion, what we say and how we say it, what music communicates by its sound and by its lyrics; must consider that certain activities, while not prohibited by Scripture, communicate the wrong message. To become oblivious to meaning is to become oblivious to excellence. A Christian who does not consider the meaning of his or her activities will become morally indifferent and, consequently, a supporter of profane worship. Anything and everything will be equal, equally excellent, equally good; equally useful to God's kingdom. A Christian who desires a sentiment shaped to know what is excellent does not plod through life unthinkingly, but as **Hebrews 5:14** puts it, 'Their powers of discernment have been trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil',

### *Be Serious About a Community of Worship*

The Psalmist told us in **Psalms 1:1-3** *Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. 3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.*

On the other hand **Proverbs 27:17** says *Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.*

Be in a church with Biblical values. Your church makes a statement every service about what it regards as beautiful and upright and noble and lovely, by the music it uses, the reverence it seeks, and the attitude toward the Word.

A church is supposed to be the guardian and conservatory of what is beautiful and upright and lovely. Now we don't always get it right. But we are to seek to be an example of transcendence. You may not find an ideal church. But the only church you should be in is one that understands the ideal and presses towards it. Those who defend error and defend idolatry are not the kind we are to entrust the keeping of our religious sentiment to.

When a church takes what is common and fairly ugly and tacky and uses it to worship God – that shapes God's people. It makes God's people think two things, a) that what is tacky maybe isn't so tacky after all – since it is in church – so it must be OK for the rest of life and, b) that God can't be all that transcendent if we can worship Him like this.

To know why churches think and act the way they do means you need to do some digging. Read up on the history of ideas. What ideas dominated the minds of men like Johann Sebastian Bach, Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Gerhard Tersteegen? Their music and poetry

and hymnody reflected their ideas and their church culture. Read up on church history – what happened; why we are where we are today. It will do you good to know that the current state of worship has not been an evolution, but a devolution, and why. Again, if your church at least understands that, while they may not be ideal, they may know what the ideal is, and instead of defending profane worship, will be seeking to repair the ruins.

But the stakes are very high. Those who consistently reject what is beautiful in favour of their warped tastes will not be pure and blameless on the day of Christ. And worst of all, their worship will be limited, damaged, or possibly even turn into false worship altogether.

Your tastes are not fixed. They can and must be shaped by God's Word, and by exposure to what God's people have universally regarded as pure and upright and noble and excellent. So be in the Word of God, and allow the Spirit of God to reshape your sentiment. Care for your religious imagination by exposing it to the best of the humanities. Be a contemplative person who measures the meanings of words, of activities of actions and symbols. And place yourself in a community of believers who share the same desire to approve the things that are excellent. In this way, our hearts and minds are ready to receive the Biblical metaphors and soar with them. Our souls will be fertile ground for the Spirit's showers of illumination to grow into lush forests of joy and love for God. Our hearts will again feel awe, trembling awe in the presence of a God so glorious, for we will start to again to understand the meaning of the word *glory*.