

## **Worship (4) True Worship vs. False Worship**

If you came across false worship, would you be able to identify it?

There is such a thing as the true worship of God, and there is such a thing as false worship of God.

It's important to know this because the Bible makes this point fairly often. And the reason it makes this point is that man, in his pride, thinks that if he does something worshipful in God's direction, God must and will certainly accept it and He will be pleased with it. Postmodernism infects us with the thinking that there can be no absolutes for worship – it is all very personal.

Cain is a good illustration of this. He presented a flawed offering, faulty material, not according to God's instruction, assuming that God would accept it.

Today religious people, full-time clergy, Christian singers, radio and TV presenters, entire churches, do not examine Who they are worshipping, what worship is to be and if what they are doing is acceptable to the Lord. They believe that if it's pointed in God's general direction it is acceptable.

But the reason why this is not sufficient is as Christ said to the Samaritan woman in **John 4:21-24**: *Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. <sup>24</sup> God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."*

### **'You worship what you do not know'**

Notice verse 23 – *the true worshippers*. Now if Jesus qualifies the word 'worshippers' with the adjective 'true', what does that imply? It implies there are also false worshippers, i.e. – you are worshipping, but it is false worship.

In both **Matthew 15:9** and **Mark 7:7** Jesus said of Israel: *"They worship Me in vain"*. Their worship is empty, it is vain – therefore it is false.

If worship is the priority as we have already seen, then it is critical that we distinguish between true and false worship. We are very much at risk, being people in church, of falling into the category of false worshippers.

To define true worship in contrast to false worship, I want to give it to you as three building blocks, one on top of another. *True worship is when you worship the true God, and you worship Him the right way, and you worship Him with the right motive.*

### **I. To Be a True Worshipper, You Must Worship the True God**

False worship at its most obvious is to worship a god or gods other than the Creator Himself.

The first of the Ten Commandments is *"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."*  
**(Exodus 20:3)**

In the Bible we find the occurrence of the worship of a number of false gods - Baal, Ashtoreth, Molech, Thammuz, Dagon, Rimon, Osiris, Isis, Horus, Diana, Mars, Saturn, Jupiter.

In our day – it is the worship of the Hindu gods, of the Earth, of Pagan gods.

But what of religions that worship one God and call Him God? The orthodox Jews claim to worship God. The Moslems claim to worship God. But the fact is that the God revealed in Scripture is a Trinity. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is One God, subsisting in Three Persons. Each Person is God. Yet they are not three Gods, but three Persons and one God.

And the New Testament makes it very clear that access to the Father is through the Son – **John 1:18, 14:6**. Furthermore, it teaches us that knowing the Son comes by the Spirit. The Trinity is not some particularity of Christian doctrine that we can dispense with for the sake of ecumenical dialogue – it is who the Bible reveals God to be.

If a religion does not worship the Creator as He has revealed Himself, their monotheism does not make their worship acceptable. Significantly, the epistle of **1 John** ends this way:

*And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen (1John 5:20-21)*

But there is a second way that we can enter into this danger, and that is what I believe the second command of the Ten Commandments is meaning:

**Exodus 20:4** *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth ..*

This is not forbidding making paintings or sculptures. The idea there is ‘*Do not try to represent the true God according to your own imagination.*’ Or to put it another way – do not invent or create God in your own image or in the image of something else.

God says in **Psalms 50:21** *These things you have done, and I kept silent; You thought that I was altogether like you; But I will rebuke you, And set them in order before your eyes.*

**“You thought that I was altogether like you: but I will rebuke you...”**

To make up a god in your own mind, and then paste the name of God on top of that god is simply another form of idolatry. You might have the name right, but you have the identity wrong. This is I believe what was happening in **Exodus 32** with the golden calf. Aaron constructed a visual representation of Yahweh.

In fact most of Israel and Judah’s idolatry took place alongside a fully functioning priesthood and sacrificial system. The ‘worship’ of Yahweh went on, alongside the worship of other deities, and they didn’t see a problem with it. That’s because they had lost the true concept of Who He was, and had just pasted a name on their view of Him.

**2 Cor 11:4** – *For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!*

**‘Another Jesus, another spirit.’**

This command is based on His uniqueness. God has no peers, no contemporaries, no competitors, nor no equals. He is not the top God. He is God.

**Psalms 96:5** *For all the gods of the nations are idols: but the LORD made the heavens.*

Because He is **God**, syncretism and idolatry cannot co-exist with the true worship of Him. If only one is worthy of worship, then the glory due to Him cannot and must not be offered in any other direction.

But there is a second aspect to true worship. Once we have His identity right, we must worship Him according to His will.

## **II. To Be a True Worshipper, You Must Worship the True God in the Right Way**

In the Old Testament, we see God laying down very clear and precise commands regarding how Israel was to worship Him. It involved what kind of sacrifices to bring, the exact dimensions of the tabernacle, the ornaments inside it, the priesthood, even the garments of the priesthood, how to keep the Sabbath, how to keep the feasts, what Israelites were to eat, what they were to wear, their civil life, their economic life, their family life - all given in the form of absolutes.

No Israelite could bring a dog to the altar to sacrifice and say – “Well, sacrificing a lamb is just *your interpretation*. This is how I want to worship God, and God looks at the heart.” No, God had made it clear through many commands that there was a way to approach Him. His commands reflected His nature. He was separate. He was pure. He was excellent. He was majestic. He was merciful. And if an Israelite tried to improvise, he met with disastrous consequences.

A good example is Nadab and Abihu. It wasn’t enough that they worshipped the true God. They had to worship Him in His appointed way.

**Lev 10:3** “...*I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified.*”

A second illustration comes in the form of Uzza the priest. **I Chronicles 13:7-10.**

This was in the context of David returning the Ark. But Israel improvised and introduced a novelty – perhaps a practical one, but nonetheless, they were improvising on God’s absolutes regarding the Ark: Providentially, the oxen stumbled, and Uzza, reached out to steady the Ark, and God struck him down.

Can you fault Uzza’s motives? No, surely they were sincere. Preventing the Ark from an embarrassing and possibly damaging tumble to the ground is a good motive. But his methods were wrong. They violated God’s commands in how they were carrying the Ark. They violated God’s commands in touching the Ark.

Sincerity does not make worship acceptable by itself.

Being a full-time minister does not make the worship acceptable either.

God made a statement – “*You will worship me in the way I say you will. Your worship must correspond with My nature.*”

An illustration from daily life would be - the nature of what you delight in determines the way you delight, e.g. ice cream, music, thunderstorm, your work, dog, children, your spouse, your parents.

Applying this to the worship of God is either more true or less true, more accurate or less accurate, more fitting or less fitting, depending on what you do – because God is a certain way. If your acts of worship do not correspond with His nature, then it is false worship. The identity might be right, the motives might be right, but the material is all wrong.

A good illustration is found in Malachi – they were offering blind and lame offerings. Why was that not acceptable? It was not acceptable because God is excellent. God is a majestic Authority. Try that with your governor, He says. Bringing God your best, bringing it reverently is true worship, because it corresponds with God’s nature. To give God your leftovers, to do so knowingly, is to present bad material, regardless of original motive or intention.

The same thing occurs in **1 Kings 12:26-32** with Jereboam.

<sup>26</sup> And Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: <sup>27</sup> If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!”<sup>29</sup> And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.<sup>30</sup> Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan.<sup>31</sup> He made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi.<sup>32</sup> Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did at Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And at Bethel he installed the priests of the high places which he had made.

He changed absolutes, he introduced novelties (v32); he altered the qualifications for spiritual leadership (v31).

Are there absolutes for how to approach God even in the New Testament? What are some of the absolutes which the Bible demands when it comes to the method, the way, we are to worship God? They are reverence, awe, consecration, obedience, service.

**Heb 12:28** *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptable with reverence and Godly fear.*

Think about this - if a man comes up dressed in surfer shorts and sandals and then sings a rock song to Jesus, and then gives a testimony in which he laces his comments with profanities and blasphemies. Leaving aside all else, could you say that He is approaching God reverently? To say his motive is right, or to speak of his sincerity

becomes like speaking about Uzza's sincerity. God says, "...By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified." (Lev 10:3)

As we'll see, the way we worship is in Spirit and in truth. The Spirit enables, and the truth of the Word guides. And the Spirit will use the Word to guide us to respond appropriately to our God.

Sixty nine times in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy – the books which regulated the worship of Israel - the phrase '*I am the LORD*' appears. Often it is at the end of a command. Why? God is saying – 'You do this, because I am this.' Your worship forms will reflect my unchanging nature.

The forms of our worship must reflect the nature of our God.

The third possibility for false worship is this: *right God, right method, but wrong motives.*

### **III. To Be a True Worshipper, You Must Worship the True God in the Right Way with the Right Motives**

Who comes to mind when you think of a group of people who believed in the true God, and followed His prescribed laws to a fault, but whose motives were all wrong? The Pharisees comes to mind.

**Matthew 15:7-9** <sup>7</sup> *Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:<sup>8</sup> 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honour Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.<sup>9</sup> And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'*

Jesus exposed their motives a number of times.

**Mat 23:5** *But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments.*

**John 5:44** *How can you believe, who receive honour from one another, and do not seek the honour that comes from the only God?*

**Mat 6:5** *"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward..."*

Now their motives were wrong, and Jesus rebuked them as false worshippers. Why should God bother with motives? He bothers because He is omniscient. He knows our thoughts.

**Heb 4:13** *And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.*

Outward behaviour cannot impress Him, because He cannot be fooled. He knows what we are thinking.

**John 2:23-25** *Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them,*

*because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.*

Picture meeting someone for coffee, and being able to hear their thoughts. They smile at you, address you by name, and say all the right things. They are polite, and a pleasure to be with. But then you hear their thoughts, “Boy is this boring! I hope he/she is thankful I am meeting with them. This is so wearisome. I can’t wait to get home.” What would it do to your enjoyment of that meeting?

God is not going to be impressed with the right words but with the wrong heart.

**Psalm 51:6** *Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.*

In the New Testament God taught the early church a very stern warning about pure motives - Ananias and Saphira. This was an example of right God, right method, but wrong motives – to appear wholeheartedly sacrificial while keeping back some.

Therefore true worship must come with the right motive – to love Him, to know Him, to glorify Him.

If we come to use God to fix our problems, if we come to impress others, if we come to calm a guilty conscience, if we come to strengthen our religious pride – we will be worshipping in vain.

**Heb 10:22** *let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

True worship is a matter of truly knowing Him. God must be revealed. He must firstly be revealed for who He is – the Triune God, revealed in the face of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Secondly, He must be revealed for what He is like – the powerful God, the supreme One, the one and only unique God, the all-knowing God who knows our hearts, the majestic God who deserves consecration and reverence and service and honour.

Worship is not a matter of entertainment pleasing to man. It is a matter of correspondence. What you do must correspond with who He is. The list of people whose service for God was rejected is proof enough that not all things sent in God’s direction are accepted. Much of it will be returned to sender, marked ‘Unacceptable’.

So three building blocks:

- [ Worship the true God.
- [ Worship the true God the right way – His way.
- [ Worship the true God the right way with the right motives.

So seek Him. Seek to know Him as He is.