

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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How to Worship

In the previous two talks in this series, we have looked at 'How to study the Bible' and 'How to pray'. These are both very important parts of the Christian life. Our subject this morning, 'How to worship', covers what is, perhaps, the most important aspect of our Christian life. Yet it is also, in some respects, the most difficult part of our Christian life and consequently, sometimes, the most neglected.

Have you ever been for a long walk under a hot sun – yes, it is possible even in this country! – and just longed for a refreshing drink of cold water? What bliss, then, to be able to sit down and quench one's thirst! You might be wondering what is the connection between a thirsty traveller and worship?

But one of the most important passages in the Bible on the subject of worship arose out of a conversation between the Lord Jesus, when He was tired and thirsty after a long walk under the noonday sun, and a poor Samaritan woman who had come to the well of Sychar to fill her waterpot.

We need to spend a little time reading this important passage. It is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 4. After this broadcast, take time to read the whole of this chapter. We have time now to read only a few verses.

"A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give Me a drink'...Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, 'How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?' For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered and said to her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink', you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water...Who ever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life'. The woman said to Him, 'Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst nor come here to draw.' Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come here.' The woman answered and said, 'I have no husband'. Jesus said to her, 'You have well said, 'I have no husband', for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband...' The woman said to Him, 'Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. 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. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth'".

In chapter 3 of John's Gospel, one of the leaders of the Jews, Nicodemus, came to Jesus by night. Jesus had to speak to him about his need for new birth, a totally new life in Christ. Now Jesus speaks to this evidently sinful, immoral woman about worship! We might have thought that things should have been the other way round – that Nicodemus should have been told about worship and the Samaritan woman about the need for a new beginning. But Jesus was absolutely right, as always! Nicodemus needed to be reminded that his self-righteousness was just not good enough for God. The Samaritan woman, probably all too painfully aware of her sinful condition, needed to be assured that God was looking for worship, even from the likes of her! That should encourage all of us today. Whatever our needs and shortcomings, God has made a way for us through the work of the Lord Jesus at Calvary to be able to worship Him. We should not be put off by the difficulties of the subject. Our worship really matters to God!

It might be helpful if we look at our subject today under four headings:

1. What is worship?
2. Whom should we worship?
3. Why should we worship? And finally,
4. How to worship?

What is worship?

The dictionary tells us that one of the meanings of '-ship' when used as a suffix at the end of a word is 'status, office, or honour', as in 'authorship' or 'lordship'. Our English word 'worship' derives essentially from 'worth-ship' and

involves, then, a recognition of the essential worth of the one worshipped. So it might be said today of a young man very much in love with his beloved, "Oh, he worships the ground she walks on". Sadly, the devotion offered to the superstars of sport and pop by their devotees is tantamount to worship.

Whom should we worship?

The Bible makes it very clear that God alone is to be worshipped. So the first of the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai is "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). Before Moses could come down from the mountain to the camp of the Israelites, the Israelites had already broken that commandment by making a golden calf and worshipping it. In his distress, Moses broke the two tablets of stone on which the commandments had been written. Moses was later asked by God to return and be given two new tablets of commandments. God's word to Moses then was even more specific: "You shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14). We should just note, in passing, that human jealousy is so often associated with hatred and anger because we are sinners. Here, God uses the word 'jealous' in the best sense of the word, meaning 'a deep feeling of love that will brook no rival'.

The Lord Jesus Himself reinforced this important message that worship belongs to God alone. In the wilderness, Satan tempted Jesus to worship him, promising Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if He would do so. Jesus' answer was immediate: "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (Matthew 4:10).

Why should we worship?

One simple answer would be that we are commanded to do so: "He is your Lord, worship Him" (Psalm 45:11). But worship only as an act of enforced obedience would be a very poor thing. We may be moved by a beautiful sunset or by an awe-inspiring view of snow-covered mountains to worship God as Creator. We have a deep sense of His worth as the One who brought all these things into being. But the knowledge of the Lord Jesus as my Saviour, the One who died for my sins at Calvary, is surely the strongest motive of all to lead me to worship Him, to acknowledge His supreme worth.

Just a brief glance at Matthew's Gospel is sufficient to show how many and varied were the people who were moved to worship Christ. In the first mention of 'worship' in the New Testament in Matthew 2:11, we read, "And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh". That deep sense of worth which filled the hearts of the wise men is evidenced by the very costly gifts they presented to the Christ Child.

In 8:2 we read, "And behold, a leper came and worshipped Him, saying, "Lord, if you are willing, You can make me clean". That poor leper was already convinced that Jesus was able to do for him what no other had been able to do. He learned that day that Jesus was also more than willing to heal him in his need. A ruler of the synagogue, Jairus, recognised that same power that was in the Lord Jesus: "While [Jesus] spoke these things to them, behold a ruler came and worshipped Him, saying, 'My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her and she will live'" (9:18).

One night, Jesus came walking on the water to go to the aid of His disciples, caught in a storm on Lake Galilee. As He stilled the storm that raged on the lake, and that no doubt raged in their own hearts also, we read, "Then those who were in the boat came and worshipped Him, saying, 'Truly You are the Son of God'" (14:33). Even a poor Canaanite woman, outside the fold of Israel, came to Jesus. We read, "Then she came and worshipped Him, saying, "Lord, help me" (15:25). Matthew's Gospel ends on that same note of worship, this time to Christ in resurrection: "And as [the women] went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, "Rejoice!" And they came and held Him by the feet and worshipped Him" (28:9; see also verse 17). To use the language of Hebrews 12:1, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, not only to faith, but also to worship.

How to worship

In our local bookshop, you will find a whole series of books on 'How to...': 'How to pass your driving test'; 'How to improve your French'; 'How to cook'. The list is endless. But I have not yet seen a book for a baby on 'How to breathe!' The reasons for that are twofold. Firstly, there is the obvious reason that a baby cannot read! But secondly, that new-born baby does not need to be told how to breathe. Breathing is an instinctive response of the life in that baby. In the same way, worship ought to be the instinctive response of that new life the Christian has in Christ in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

I have to say that I cringe, sometimes, when I read of 'Worship workshops' being arranged as though I can learn to worship in the same way as I might go to car maintenance classes. It seems that such 'worship workshops' are largely

concerned with singing hymns. Worship has been described as “the upflow of adoration which rises from a redeemed soul to God” (FB Hole). Another has described it as “making much to God of His beloved Son”. Many of our hymns, much loved and inspiring as they may be, simply do not fall into this category. Some are expressions of need, testimonies to help given, blessings wished upon others.

Jesus was able to speak to the woman at Sychar’s well about worship because He knew that her experience of the transforming grace which He was about to work in her life would lead her to that spiritually instinctive response of worship that we have been speaking about. But first He must teach this woman about the very important changes which He was about to bring in.

Up till that moment, the Jews had worshipped God, known by His covenant name to Israel, Jehovah, meaning the self-existent One, in the temple at Jerusalem, on Mount Zion. Their Samaritan neighbours, not to be outdone, had set up a rival temple on Mount Gerizim. That system of temple worship was first given by God to Moses and consisted of a literal place of worship, firstly the Tabernacle in the wilderness and then the Temple in the Land of Israel. Along with the place went a system of worship based on priests with holy garments, together with visible sacrifices of animals and grain. The majority of the people were excluded from the presence of God. That holy privilege belonged only to the High Priest and that but once a year. That system had held good for some 1,300 years until Christ came.

But Jesus, in the light of His coming death at Calvary which would remove in one stroke the barrier of sin that separates man from God, speaks to the woman of the profound change which He was about to introduce: “The hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father” (John 4:21).

No longer would God be known in the remote way made known at Mount Sinai as Jehovah, the One who gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. He would be known as Father and worshipped as such by His children, those brought into His family through the death of His Son, Jesus, at Calvary. In the early hours of that first Easter morning, the Lord Jesus announced that new relationship to Mary Magdalene. It’s as though that good news could not be kept for a moment longer: “Go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God’” (John 20:17). Christian worship is a totally different thing from the worship offered by the Israelites to Jehovah. It has at its heart the worship of the Father and the Son.

It is important to recognise the fact that God the Father must be worshipped in the way which He has laid down. It is so easy to think that each of us should worship God in the way in which each of us feels comfortable. But the important question is not ‘Is it right for me?’ but ‘Is it right for God the Father?’ So Jesus went on to say to the woman at the well, “The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth... God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (verses 23 and 24).

No longer is a Christian worship confined to a particular place and to a particular group of people, as in Tabernacle and Temple days. Christians, whether as individuals or as companies of God’s people, have been brought into the glorious liberty of being free to worship the Father and the Son wherever they are! “In spirit” tells us that Christian worship is not motivated by externals, like buildings, vestments, sacrifices but rather proceeds from the heart, as the spirit of the worshipper is moved by the Holy Spirit to worship the Father and the Son.

It finds its highest expression, perhaps, when Christians come together to remember the Lord Jesus in His death. Faced then with the loaf of bread and the cup of wine, the only material emblems sanctioned by Christ, we are reminded so forcibly of the wonder of His giving of Himself for us at Calvary. Our hearts are ready then to burst out in thanksgiving and worship as we consider how the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world (1 John 4:14). As our human spirits are wrought upon by the Spirit of God, we may have such a deep impression of the greatness of the Father and the Son that human words fail adequately to express that worship. In that case, it may be that silence, rather than a multitude of words, is a more appropriate response.

“In truth” emphasises what we have already said, that Christian worship must proceed in line with the guidelines laid down by Scripture. Sadly, much of what passes for worship in Christendom is simply a makeover of Old Testament Jewish ritual and fails completely to recognise the new position before the Father into which we have been brought through the death of the Lord Jesus.

It might be thought that anything I might be able to offer to God the Father in worship is altogether too inconsequential. But Jesus made plain to the woman, “The Father is seeking such to worship Him” (verse 23). In that same lovely way in which the Lord Jesus as the Good Shepherd came seeking that lost sheep, you and me (see Luke 15), so God the Father is actively seeking your worship and mine! Let’s open our hearts in adoration to Him this morning!

In closing, let me remind you that the very first mention of worship in the Bible is found in Genesis 22:5. Abraham had been asked by God to offer up his only son, Isaac, in sacrifice. So we read, “And Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you’”. Even should God

demand the ultimate sacrifice from Abraham, Abraham was determined to make that costly offering an act of worship. True Christian worship is also a costly thing.

Isaac Watts catches the spirit of it:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

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