

Series: Vision Month 2022

Title: Worship

Text: Isaiah 6:1-13

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Worship is a controversial topic amongst many modern believers. Evangelical leaders have even coined the phrase “worship wars” to describe the feverish arguments which persist over music styles. This seems strange when one considers the nature of the subject. Worship shouldn’t be so divisive. It is the act of one giving his or her devotion to God, a posturing of one’s soul in submission to the Lord’s will. I personally believe much of the debate in this area are grounded in misunderstandings of what worship really is. Preferences, tradition, and culture have become king for many. They’ve grounded their entire approach to God on a self-oriented perspective, instead of basing it on Scripture-oriented principles. Let’s consider two important topics related to worship.

REQUIREMENTS FOR WORSHIP

Worship is the act of giving worth to God. It is the primary reason for which we have been created. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord declared that all of His people have been made for His glory (Isaiah 43:6). Worship is the act of maintaining this relational dynamic. It is a spiritual practice whereby we set our souls upon Him. In order to live up to our original purpose, we must understand the nature of true worship. Consider three requirements.

Continuity Real worship isn’t hit or miss, flighty, or inconsistent. It involves consistency and continuity. It’s not just an aspect of life; it is a way of life. There are times for scheduled worship — specially devoted occasions on which we gather with God’s people for corporate praise and the public proclamation of God’s Word (Colossians 3:16 and Hebrews 10:24-25). In addition, each of us should plan secret times of private prayer and praise (Matthew 6:6). However, we must be on guard against what I call the “God in a box routine.” Through such a practice, we limit God to certain spots on our schedule. We segment our lives, and separate worship to its own little time. The remainder of our calendar is filled with hurried pursuits which reflect little of God’s presence. The Lord desires for His people to live differently. They are to “pray constantly” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and they are to continually keep their “eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter” of their faith (Hebrews 12:2).

Sacrifice Real worship costs something. It involves a personal sacrifice. Modern believers have missed this. They’ve allowed a consumer-driven society to dupe them into thinking that worship is about them. They approach preaching and praise for what they can get, not what they can give. If songs and Scriptures aren’t served up the way they like it, they start looking for another church where they can “get fed.” The Bible knows little of the me-centered Christianity which exists today. The author of Hebrews proclaimed, “Therefore, through Him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of our lips that confess His name” (Hebrews 13:5). Real worship involves a sacrifice of the soul and self. David knew this. That’s why he was insistent to pay for the place upon which he would build an altar to the Lord (2 Samuel 24:18-25).

Godward Focus It’s so easy to get distracted in worship. If we are not vigilant, our minds can easily wander. Before we know it, we’ve lost sight of what’s important. Our attention is fixed on mundane things, and we have little regard for God. In both the public and private occasions of worship, we must be careful to maintain a godward focus. The Israelites had a habit which reminded them of this significant matter while in captivity. Whenever they prayed or worshipped from the place of exile, they directed their gaze towards their home — Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:33-36 and Daniel 6:10). In the New Testament age, Jesus has instructed us to do something similar. We are to fix our attention on our heavenly home (Matthew 6:9). By having this focus, we will naturally place our attention on our Heavenly Father (Colossians 3:1-2).

Spirit Jesus said, “An hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth” (John 4:23). The word “spirit” refers to the immaterial part of mankind. It is the aspect of our being which has the capacity to relate to God (see Galatians 5:16). Worshiping God with Spirit doesn’t necessarily refer to singing with emotional gusto or bravado. The pagans of Elijah’s day ranted and raved in a religious fashion, but they didn’t really connect with God (see 1 Kings 18:26-29). Spirit-centered worship isn’t as much about emotion as it is about an encounter with God. Sometimes real praise will result in tears, a raised hand, or other displays. Other times it won’t. Faith in God, not feelings, are what’s most important. Real worship involves a real spiritual connection with the Lord (see Romans 8:9, 22, and 26).

Substance Real worship involves a subjective, Spirit-oriented approach, but it also involves an objective, Scripture-oriented aspect. Jesus referenced the importance of worshiping in “truth.” Though we live in a society which often denies the possibility of fixed truth (see John 18:38), Scripture teaches otherwise. Jesus Himself was the embodiment of truth (see John 14:6), and God delivered a book which explains His truth (see John 17:17). Christians are instructed to live their lives according to truth (see Ephesians 6:14). It stands to reason that our worship should be based on truth, as Jesus maintained. Sadly, many Christians ignore this important aspect. They allow a culture of consumer-driven entertainment to condition their thinking. They don’t measure worship on the basis of the Bible. Instead, they evaluate it as if it was a performance, making presentation and instrumentation their chief concern.

Style The Lord has not codified a certain type of worship style which He deems best. He allows room for a multitude of modes of expression (see Psalm 150:3-5 and Colossians 3:16), knowing that humankind is a diverse bunch. In heaven, all of the redeemed sing a similar type of song (see Revelation 4:11), but diversity is still a reality (see Revelation 7:9-10). The Lord’s allowance of various means of worship in heaven, shows that we should be fine with a blended approach here on earth. Those who squabble as if their way is best, demanding that others bow to their preferences and resisting cultural changes which are inevitable, show that they are off-focus.

COUNTERFEIT FORMS OF WORSHIP

God created us for worship. The Bible teaches we are made in His image (Genesis 1:26). This means we are designed to know Him and to make Him known. Such is the essence of worship. Through praise-oriented thoughts, words, and actions, we direct our souls towards our Creator. We experience real life when we worship in this way, because it is the reason we are alive. Sadly, many never tap into the joy that is available. Some choose to worship the false gods of this world, so they never find real contentment. Others take a stab at worship, but they fall short. The reason? They settle for cheap imitations of the real thing. Let’s look at eight forms of counterfeit worship.

A Cultural Celebration Some have a form of praise which is little more than a celebration of culture. Tradition and custom is the main focus. Such people would be uncomfortable worshipping with the early church, or with modern believers from third world countries. Their entire religious paradigm revolves around religious tapestry from a certain era. If the music, schedule of service, clothing attire, and decorative atmosphere is not in alignment with their preconceived expectations, they seem unable to focus on God. They might even get a bit grumpy...or inflammatory. Their attitude reveals a sad reality — their worship isn’t grounded in Christ. It is more concerned with a romanticized fascination with a certain culture. Consider Paul’s example. Prior to conversion, his entire religious paradigm was built upon the practices of his Hebrew heritage. After he came to Christ, he saw them as being “a loss because of Christ:” (Philippians 3:3-11).

An Emotional Experience Others think true worship has to involve tears, shouting, goosebumps, or some other tangible evidence of God’s presence. I’ve sometimes been told that worship ought to involve such manifestations, or it may not be legitimate. I once

responded to a guy, telling him that I got goosebumps the first time I went to a NASCAR race, but that didn't mean the event was spiritual! Sometimes worship might involve heightened emotions, other times it won't. What's important is that we worship in the Spirit, and according to the truth of God (John 4:24). We must avoid the folly of the ancient pagans who worshipped Baal. They believed ecstatic emotions were proof of their piety (1 Kings 18:26). Their shenanigans were actually evidence of their shallow faith. People with strong faith don't need outward demonstrations for validation (Hebrews 11:1). Sure, real worship will often touch our emotions, but we should make emotions our main focus.

A Doctrinal Duty A third group is plagued by an overly theoretical approach. They make religion all about knowledge. They fail to see that knowing God isn't an academic endeavor. It involves the heart and soul. It is true that we must know truth in order to worship our Lord in a worthy manner, and it is true that we should grow in our understanding of God (2 Peter 1:5). However, we must avoid stale religion which treats Christ as if He is a subject to be studied. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were guilty of this. They had a dogged determination concerning doctrine, but they were deficient in true devotion (Matthew 23:23).

An Entertainment Event Our media-saturated, event-oriented culture has duped many into believing that worship is a spectacle to be enjoyed. A diminishing few approach Sunday mornings with an eye on service and consecration. Quality of services are gauged with a "what did I get out of it" standard. Such was the case with many of the religious folks in Jesus' day. They preferred to be amazed by dazzling miracles over being confronted with the truth of God (Matthew 12:38-39). Don't hear what I am not saying. When we truly worship God, we will receive. But that should never be our main motive. It is more blessed to give than to receive, and giving glory to God should be our first priority.

A Cover Up for Corruption There is a debased type of person who uses the things of God to satiate his or her conscience. Participation in worship and the ministry of the Word serves as an outward veneer to mask a heart of corruption. Isaiah preached to such folks. Through him, the Lord said, "When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will refuse to look at you... Your hands are covered with blood" (Isaiah 1:15). The early church was marked by similar individuals, imposters who used holy things for image enhancement (Acts 5:1-11). If you want to worship God rightly, start by getting your personal life in order (Isaiah 1:16-17 and Matthew 23:25-26).

A Political Parade There is always a temptation to mix matters related to government and God. The Christian certainly has a responsibility to civic affairs (Matthew 22:21 and 1 Timothy 2:1-2), but the Christian must be careful about melding civic affairs into religious affairs. The Bible teaches that the end of time will be marked by an apostate state-oriented religion (Revelation 13:1-10). Christians must be vigilant so that they don't disregard the King of Kings in their rabid preoccupation with earthly kings. Such was the mistake of the first century Jews who murdered Jesus (Matthew 21:8-9 and John 19:15).

Mysticism Some corrupt the time of worship through an overemphasis on mystical elements. Priority is placed on feelings, sensations, and emotions. Today, many within mainline Christianity are given over to mysticism through the way in which they seek to hear from God through visions, dreams, private words of prophecy, ecstatic experiences, and speaking in tongues. While true worship may involve an emotional response, it should never be based on emotions. The faith, not feelings, is the bedrock of true praise. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians and the Colossians, he had to correct them for their error in this area (1 Corinthians 14:1-25 and Colossians 3:17-23).

Show Some Christian gatherings seem to be about little more than spiritual showmanship. If believers aren't on guard, preaching and praise can become a pretext for pride. The platform can be changed into a stage for self-glory. Such was the case among the church at Corinth. Paul rebuked the congregation for the way in which its members used worship for the limelight (1 Corinthians 14:26).