

“Worship in Spirit and Truth”
Series: Catalysts for Spiritual Growth
Psalm 63:1-5, Rev. 5:11-14, John 4
February 22, 2009

Today we come to the last message in our series on Catalysts for Spiritual Growth. You will by now recognize this continuum we’ve used as a tool to help us think about *where we are now* in our relationships with Christ. Exploring Christ, Growing in Christ, Close to Christ, Christ-Centered. I started out the first Sunday of 2009 by saying that my great desire and prayer as your pastor was that all of us who call Covenant home would grow spiritually over the course of this year. God loves you wherever you are on the continuum, but He does not intend to leave you there. God’s purpose for your life is that you become more and more like Jesus. God’s desire is that you grow in your relationship with Him. To that end, we’ve been talking about various practices – catalysts – that produce spiritual growth in our lives. We’ve talked about Reflecting on the Scripture, Prayer, Fasting, Giving, Community, and Service. [get CDs if you missed one.]

The catalyst I want to speak with you about today is worship. What do you picture or think of when I say “worship”? Maybe the image that comes to your mind is of a great gothic cathedral with stained glass windows and the smell of incense in the air. Or maybe it’s a great mass of people kneeling or bowing down before God. Maybe it’s what happens in your house when *American Idol* comes on. What comes to your mind when I say, “worship”? Our reading from Revelation gives us a picture of heavenly worship: A hundred thousand angels circling the throne of God, all singing in a loud voice: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Every creature in heaven and on earth and in the sea all singing together: “To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” And the elders gathered around the throne fall down on their faces and worship. Wow! What a picture! To be in the very presence of God Himself and to sing with the angels, and to be so moved by the presence of God in that place that the only response you have is to fall down on your face and worship Him.

The English word ‘worship’ comes from an Old English word, *worþship*. To worship is, at its most basic, to ascribe proper worth to God. We worship God simply because God is worth worshipping. “*Worthy* is the Lamb that was slain...” the angels sing. And we should notice that in this passage from Revelation, the angels and others are singing *to God about God*. Worship is first and foremost directed to God and is about God. Worship is our response to who God is and what God has done. It is not first and foremost *for us* or *about us*. Worship is focusing on and responding to God. That’s what we see in this picture from Revelation. Everything and everyone in this picture is focused on God. They are singing to God about who He is and what He deserves because of who He is. The more we focus on God, the more we understand and appreciate who He is and what He has done. And the more we understand and appreciate who God is and what He has done, the more we are moved to respond to Him. And that response is – or ought to be – worship.

God commands us to worship Him – not because He likes to throw His godly weight around, but because He knows it’s ultimately better for us to focus on Him. After all, people tend to become like what they focus on, what they are devoted to. You become like those you hang around with

– for better or for worse. That’s why parents are so concerned about who their children’s friends are. They know that who those friends are, what those friends are like, will have a great influence on who their children become, what they are like. Listen: If you want to develop a healthier lifestyle, hang around with people who are committed to eating well, exercising, getting enough sleep, etc. The same is true for our spiritual growth, our development in the things of God: If you want to be a person who loves the Scripture and is committed to reading it and living by it, hang around with folks who do. If you want to become a tither, hang around with tithers. If you want to enjoy a deeper, more vital prayer life, hang around with folks who are better at it than you are. You will become like what or whom you focus on. This is why worship is such an important means of spiritual growth. In fact, worship is the catalyst of catalysts for spiritual growth. Because the more we worship God, the more we become like Him. The more we focus on who God is and what He has done, the more we desire to know Him, the more we desire to speak with Him in prayer, the more we desire to please Him by obeying Him and following Jesus, giving and serving as He commands and leads us.

The primary purpose of your whole life is to worship God. God desires, maybe more than anything else, that we worship Him. In fact, according to John’s gospel, Jesus said that God *seeks* worshippers. The story of Jesus’ encounter with the woman from Samaria at the well includes the most that Jesus ever said about worship. Maybe you know the story. Jesus and His disciples are traveling back to Galilee from Judea and if you were to look on a map you would see that the shortest way to go was through Samaria. Now, this was an area that had been settled by Assyria at one point in history and so the people there were of mixed race, Jewish and Assyrian. So the Jews considered them half-breeds and did not associate with them. They pretty much hated them, in fact. You’ve heard of ‘the Good Samaritan.’ Well, that would have been an oxymoron to Jewish people in Jesus’ time. Jesus sends His disciples into town to buy food while He rests at the well outside of town. And around midday, here comes this woman to get water. When Jesus asks her to give Him a drink from the well, she is surprised, because Jews do not associate with Samaritans, and besides, it’s *very* inappropriate for a Jewish man – especially a rabbi – to speak to a woman in public, any woman, even his wife.

John 4:10-18. Now, normally, women would come to the well in the cool of the early morning to get their water for the day, not in the heat of noontime. But now we find out that probably the reason this woman didn’t come when all the other women came was that she was something of, well, a hussy. They probably didn’t want to associate with her. She had been married five times and was now shackled up with a man whom she had not even bothered to marry. Well, you know, after five... So she does what we often do when confronted with uncomfortable truths about ourselves: She changes the subject. John 4:19-24.

“The true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.” God is actively seeking worshippers, Jesus says. So how do we ‘worship in spirit and in truth’? When God says we must worship Him in spirit, He means that the only acceptable worship is that which is motivated and controlled by our spirits. Worship is your spirit responding to God’s Spirit. Spiritual worship comes from the very core of your being: your spirit, your emotions, your personality, your heart. When God says we must worship Him in truth He means we must worship God as He is truly revealed in the Bible. In John, the Greek word for truth means ‘unveiled reality.’ The reality that Jesus unveils to this woman of

Samaria is that He is the One promised by God. Later in John's gospel, Jesus says that He Himself, is the truth. To worship God in truth is to worship Him *through* the truth – that is, through Jesus – as He is revealed *in* the revealed truth of God's Word, the Scriptures.

Worship in spirit involves your heart. Worship in truth involves your head. Jesus said that the greatest commandment of all was this: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength." Worship is loving God with *all*. All that you are. Worship was never meant to be merely cerebral or merely emotional. Worship that is biblical involves your body, as well. The Bible describes a variety of physical postures in connection with worship: lying prostrate, standing, kneeling, lifting the hands, clapping, and even dancing. But the main Hebrew and Greek words used in the Bible for worship have to do with bowing down before a superior. It's not just a physical bowing down God desires, but a bowing down of the will and emotions, as well.

You see, this woman's priorities for worship were wrong. She believed that it was all about *where* you worshiped. Jesus says it is not the "where" but the "how," the *attitude* with which one worships and the entry point – the truth – that is, Jesus. Today the debates – or "worship wars," as they've been called – have to do with things like: Should we follow a strict order of worship or not? Should we use drums or the organ? Should we raise our hands or keep them down? Those are the wrong questions. You can sincerely worship and experience the presence of God while following a strict order of worship. And you can sincerely *not* worship and experience the presence of God while following a strict order of worship. It is not the form worship takes that matters primarily. It's not what instruments are used. It is the heart of the worshipers. It's the attitude with which you come to worship that matters to God more than anything else.

In the Bible, when people gathered for worship, they gathered *expecting* that they would actually hear from God. *Expecting* that. *Expecting* that God would show up as they worshipped Him. I wonder: When you come here for worship, do you come *expecting* to hear from God? To experience God? Do you come *expecting* that God will reveal Himself as we worship Him? One writer has said that "when more than one or two come into public worship with a holy expectancy, it can change the atmosphere of a room."¹

Now, you may not feel comfortable with certain kinds of expression in worship, like lifting up your hands or kneeling down. You may say that you are more reserved and that that kind of worship doesn't meet your needs. Or you may say the exact opposite: that worship that *does not* include physical and verbal expressions doesn't meet your needs. But you see, the real question isn't, "What kind of worship meets *my* needs?" The question is not "What can I get out of worship?" The real question is, "What kind of worship does God desire?" What does God get out of our worship? The Scripture is clear that God calls for wholehearted AND whole-headed worship: Worship in *spirit AND truth*.

Jesus said, "Love God with *all*." Worship God with your whole being. But it must come from the heart. It's not meant to be just rote, just going through the motions. You can raise your hands in church while you're thinking about what time you have to put the pot roast in the oven. You

¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 163.

can kneel quietly or sit quietly and bow your head while you're rehashing the argument you had with your sister. I'm pretty sure neither one of those is what God wants.

Maybe the most serious indictment of worship recorded in the Bible is found in [Isaiah 29:13](#); Jesus quotes this in the gospel of Matthew: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, *but their hearts* are far from me. Their worship of Me is made up only of rules taught by men." Oh my friends, may this never be said of us.

Let's go back to our [continuum](#). Where are you now in your relationship with God? Where would you like to be? I hope you want to grow. *What are you willing to do to get there?* We've talked about some of the catalysts that will help you grow. But just talking about them won't help us grow. We actually have to decide to do something. What are you willing to *do* to grow closer to Christ? What are you willing to commit to *doing* to move along in your spiritual journey, to be closer to Jesus, to grow in your relationship with God? Will you commit to reading and reflecting on the Bible every day? A time of prayer every day? Maybe you want to try fasting. Or try trusting God with more of your money. Will you try out community in a LIFE Group? Find a way to serve? What are you willing to *do* to grow?

If you want to commit to taking a step to grow, we want to offer you a chance to do that today. We've talked about worship, now let's actually worship. As we sing, you are invited to come forward and stand or kneel as a sign of your commitment. You can, of course, make your commitment where you are, it's really just between you and God. But there is something about coming forward publicly and saying "yes" to God. After we sing, I'll pray over us all before we are sent back out into the world.

Dear ones, let us worship God with all our hearts, minds, and strength. Let us worship in spirit and in truth. Because that is the kind of worship that pleases God.