

Worship God!

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Scripture: [Revelation 22:8-9](#)

Topic: [Life of Worship](#)

Series: [Worship God](#)

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things. But he said to me, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God."

Reasons for a Series on Worship

I begin today a series of messages on worship. There are two reasons, at least. One is that worship is what we were created for. This is the final end of all existence: the worship of God. God created the universe so that it would display the worth of his glory. And he created us so that we would see this glory and reflect it by knowing and loving it - with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. The other reason is that since the last time I preached on worship, hundreds of new people have come to Bethlehem, including a new lead worshipper, Chuck Steddom. So we need to rebuild a common vision of what worship is and what we are gathering to do on Sunday morning, and scattering to do on Monday morning. What is it? Why do we do it? How do we do it? Those are the questions for the next several weeks, and I think you are going to be surprised what we find in the Bible, which is where we will be looking for answers.

Worship God!

I begin with [Revelation 22:9](#) not because I intend to do an exposition of it today, but because I want us to hear the simple command, "Worship God!" The angel said to John, when he fell down at the angel's feet, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God." In other words, don't worship angels, worship God! Don't worship nothing, worship God! Don't neglect God or despise God, worship God! This is the last chapter of the Bible, and this is the last duty of man: worship God!

What I aim to do this morning is a broad overview of the New Testament by way of introduction to the theme.

What we find in the New Testament, perhaps to our amazement, is an utterly stunning degree of indifference to worship as an outward ritual, and an utterly radical intensification of worship as an inward experience of the heart.

No Gatherings Called "Worship Services" in the New Testament

Let's begin with a startling fact, namely, that in the epistles of the New Testament there is very little instruction that deals explicitly with corporate worship - what we call worship services. Not that there were no corporate gatherings for worship: [1 Corinthians 14:23](#) speaks of "the whole church gathering together," and [Acts 2:46](#) speaks of the early church "attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes," and [Hebrews 10:25](#) speaks of "not neglecting to meet together." But this is not much and the remarkable thing is that, even when the gatherings are in view, the apostles do not speak explicitly of "worship."

Let me illustrate this so that you feel its full force. In the Old Testament the most common word for worship is the Hebrew word *hishtahvah* (or some related form of that word). Its basic meaning is "bow

down," with the sense of reverence and respect and honor. It occurs 171 times. In the Greek Old Testament, 164 of those instances of this Hebrew word are translated by the Greek word *proskuneo*.

In the Greek New Testament this is the main word for worship - *proskuneo*. But when you look at its use something astonishing appears. The word is common in the gospels (26 times) - people would often bow down worshipfully before Jesus. And it is common in the book of Revelation (21 times) because the angels and elders in heaven often bow down before God. But in the epistles of Paul it occurs only once, namely in [1 Corinthians 14:25](#) where the unbeliever falls down at the power of prophecy and confesses God is in the assembly. And it doesn't occur at all in the letters of Peter, James or John.

Now this is remarkable - that the main word for worship in the Old Testament is virtually absent from the letters of the New Testament. Why is this? Why are the very epistles that are written to help the church be what it ought to be in this age almost totally devoid of this word and of explicit teaching on the specifics of corporate worship?

"Something Greater than the Temple is Here"

Let me suggest a reason. I think the reason is found in the way Jesus treated worship in his life and teaching. His main statement is found in [John 4:20-24](#). But before we look at that, consider a few other things he said. For example, his attitude to the Temple - the main place of Jewish worship - was not at all what the Jewish leaders thought it should be.

When he wove a whip and drove out the money changers, the reason he give is not for the sake of proper sacrifices but for the sake of prayer—in fact prayer for all the nations. "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations" ([Mark 11:17](#)). In other words he focused attention away from the outward acts of Jewish sacrifices to the personal act of communion with God in prayer for all peoples.

Then he said two other things about the temple that pointed to a radically altered view of worship. He said, "Something greater than the Temple is here," referring to himself ([Matthew 12:6](#)), and he said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" ([John 2:19](#)). This attitude to the Temple not only got him killed ([Mark 14:58](#); [15:29](#)), but it also got Stephen killed ([Acts 6:14](#)). That's how important it was.

What Jesus was doing was identifying himself as the true Temple. "Something greater than the Temple is here." In himself he will fulfill everything the Temple stood for, especially the place where believers meet God. So here again he is pointing attention away from worship as a localized thing with outward ritual to a personal, spiritual experience with himself at the center. Worship does not need a building, a priesthood and a sacrificial system. It needs the risen Jesus.

True Worship is in Spirit and in Truth

What Jesus was doing to worship in the way he related to the Temple is made explicit in [John 4:20-24](#). Here he uses the word *proskuneo* - that dominant Old Testament word for worship - and shows that it was laden with outward and localized meaning, and transforms it into a concept that is mainly inward rather than outward, and mainly pervasive rather than localized.

The woman at the well said:

Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." [The word for worship used here is that common Old Testament word, *proskuneo*; and note the localized emphasis in her mind.] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father." ([John 4:20-21](#))

Here you can see him loosening worship from its outward and localized connotations. Place is not the

issue: "neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem." He goes on,

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (verses 23-24)

Here is the key sentence: true worship, which was anticipated for the age to come, has arrived: "the hour is coming [in the age to come] and now is [here in me]." And what marks this true future worship that has broken into the present time from the glorious age to come is that it is not bound by localized place or outward form. Instead of being in this mountain or in Jerusalem, it is "in spirit and in truth."

What Jesus is doing here is stripping proskuneo of its last vestiges of localized and outward connotation. Not that it will be wrong for worship to be in a place or that it will be wrong for it to use outward forms; but rather he is making explicit and central that this is not what makes worship worship. What makes worship worship is what happens "in spirit and in truth" - with or without a place and with or without outward forms.

What do those two phrases mean: "in spirit" and "in truth"?

I take "in spirit" to mean that this true worship is carried along by the Holy Spirit and is happening mainly as an inward, spiritual event, not mainly as an outward bodily event. And I take "in truth" to mean that this true worship is a response to true views of God and is shaped and guided by true views of God.

So what Jesus has done is break decisively the necessary connection between worship and its outward and localized associations. It is mainly something inward and free from locality. This is what he meant when he said, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me" ([Matthew 15:8-9](#)). When the heart is far from God, worship is vain, empty, non-existent. The experience of the heart is the defining, vital, indispensable essence of worship.

True Worship is not Oriented on a Place or an Event

Now let's go back to our earlier question: why is the central Old Testament word for worship, proskuneo, virtually boycotted by Peter, James, John and Paul in the letters they write to the churches?

I think the reason is that the word did not make clear enough the inward, spiritual nature of true worship. It carried significant connotations of place and form. The word was associated with bodily bowing down and with the actual presence of a visible manifestation to bow down before.

In the gospels, Jesus was really there in visible form to fall before. So the word proskuneo is used a lot. In the book of Revelation the bowing down usually happens to God's manifestation in heaven or to false gods on the earth. So the word proskuneo is used widely in Revelation too.

But in the epistles something very different is happening. Jesus is not present in visible glory to fall before. Therefore the whole tendency of the early church - at least as it moved out of Jerusalem - was to deal with worship as primarily inward and spiritual rather than outward and ritualistic, and primarily pervasive rather than localized.

To confirm this, and see even more clearly how radically non-place- and non-event-oriented the New Testament view of worship is, consider what Paul does to some of the other words related to Old Testament worship.

For example, the next most frequent word for worship in the Old Testament (after proskuneo) is the word latreuo (over 90 times, almost always translating `abad) which is usually translated "serve," as in [Exodus](#)

23:24: "You shall not worship their gods or serve them."

When Paul uses it for Christian worship he goes out of his way to make sure that we know he means not a localized or outward form for worship practice but a non-localized, spiritual experience. In fact, he takes it so far as to treat virtually all of life as an act of worship when lived in the right spirit. For example, in **Romans 1:9** he says, "I serve [or: worship] God in my spirit in the preaching of the Gospel." And in **Philippians 3:3** Paul says that true Christians "worship God in the Spirit of God . . . and put no confidence in the flesh." And in **Romans 12:1** Paul urges Christians to "present your bodies as living and holy sacrifices acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship."

So even when Paul uses an Old Testament word for worship, he takes pains to let us know that what he has in mind is not mainly a localized or external event of worship but an internal, spiritual experience - so much so that he sees all of life and ministry as an expression of that inner experience of worship.

You see the same thing if you take the New Testament use of the Old Testament language for Temple "sacrifices" and "priestly service." The praise and thanks of the lips is called a "sacrifice to God" (**Hebrews 13:15**). But so are good works in everyday life (**Hebrews 13:16**). Paul calls his own ministry a "priestly service [of worship]" and he calls the converts themselves an "acceptable offering [in worship]" to God (**Romans 15:16**; see also **Philippians 2:17**). He even calls the money that the churches send him "a fragrant aroma and acceptable sacrifice to God [in worship]" (**Philippians 4:18**). And his own death for Christ he calls a "drink offering to God" (**2 Timothy 4:6**).

Worship Happens in the Heart, Every Day and all the Time

So you can see what is happening in the New Testament. Worship is being significantly de-institutionalized, de-localized, de-ritualized. The whole thrust is being taken off of ceremony and seasons and places and forms; and is being shifted to what is happening in the heart - not just on Sunday, but every day and all the time in all of life.

This is what it means when we read things like, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (**1 Corinthians 10:31**). And "whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father" (**Colossians 3:17**). This is the form of worship commanded in the New Testament: to act in a way that reflects the value of the glory of God - to do a thing in the name of Jesus with thanks to God. That is the basic form of living worship. But the New Testament uses those greatest of all worship sentences without any reference to worship services. They describe life.

Even when Paul calls us to "be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father," there is no reference to a time or place or a service. In fact, the key word is "always" - "always giving thanks for all things in the name of Jesus" (see **Colossians 3:16**). This may, in fact, be what we should do in a worship service, but it is not Paul's burden to tell us that. His burden is to call for a radical, inward authenticity of worship and an all-encompassing pervasiveness of worship in all of life. Place and form are not of the essence. Spirit and truth are all-important.

"A Continuous Act of Worship"

This is what gripped and shaped the reformed tradition, especially the Puritans and their heirs. The Puritans carried through the simplification and freedom of worship in music and liturgy and architecture. Patrick Collinson summarizes Puritan theory and practice by saying that, the life of the Puritan was in one sense a continuous act of worship, pursued under an unremitting and lively sense of God's

providential purposes and constantly refreshed by religious activity, personal, domestic and public.

One of the reasons Puritans called their churches "meeting houses" and kept them very simple was to divert attention from the physical place to the inward, spiritual nature of worship.

My conclusion then is that in the New Testament there is a stunning indifference to the outward forms and places of worship. And there is, at the same time, a radical intensification of worship as an inward, spiritual experience that has no bounds and pervades all of life. These emphases were recaptured in the Reformation and came to clear expression in the Puritan wing of the Reformed tradition.

What begs for attention now is the question: what is the essence of that radical, authentic, inward experience called worship, and how is it that this experience comes to expression in gathered congregations and in everyday life? We will turn to that next week.

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