

John MacArthur

TRUE WORSHIP I

Study Notes – Selected Scriptures

TRUE WORSHIP

Part 1

Introduction

John 4:20-24 is going to be the touchstone for our study of worship. We'll be coming back to it intermittently throughout this series, and then we'll look at it in more depth. I believe John 4:20-24 is the most significant New Testament passage on the subject of worship — so we must understand its truths.

Our text is a conversation between the woman of Samaria and our Lord Jesus Christ. She says: “*Our fathers worshiped in this mountain; and Ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe Me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what. We know what we worship; for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.*” The word “worship” appears eight times in this passage. Therefore, it is essential that we understand what our Lord is saying here.

Most people go to church for what they can get. Some people just check out the church page in their newspaper to see who's playing where on a given Sunday, and go for what will appeal to them, or “bless” them. Well, if you go to church for what you can *get* out of the music, or what you can get out of the sermon, or just to *get* blessed, you've missed the point. The music and the sermon aren't ends in themselves, they are but stimuli to cause you to worship God. And if you have any thought less than that, you've missed the point!

We go to church to worship God, and that's done by giving, not getting. We go to offer something to Him, not to receive from Him. Granted, if we offer to Him the praise due His name, we will receive at His hand. There is blessing in giving, for the Lord is quoted as saying, “*It is more blessed to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:35b). So, worship is giving to God, not getting.

Do you worship when you go to church? Is that what's in your mind? Do you prepare your heart for worship? When you are getting dressed, or when you are in your car on your way to church, is your heart eager to worship God? Have you ever asked yourself these questions? Well, if you haven't, I'm going to force you to do so in this series. In fact, my purpose in this series is to force you to make a decision about whether you're going to worship God or not. My objective is to make you think, first of all, about what worship is; secondly, whether you're doing it or not; and thirdly, if not . . . will you? And if you won't, then you're going to have to deny what the Bible says. I want to force you into a corner where you have no other alternative than to do what God says, or to not do what God says ... and know clearly what you've done.

A. Worship

What is worship? Let me give you a definition: Worship is “honor paid to a superior being.” It means “to give homage, honor, reverence, respect, adoration, praise, or glory to a superior being.” In Scripture, the word is used indiscriminately to refer to the homage given to idols, material things, or to the true God. So the word in itself is not a holy word, it only describes honor given to a superior being.

The common New Testament word for worship is *proskuneo*, which means “to kiss toward, to kiss the hand, to bow down, to prostrate oneself.” The idea of worship is that one prostrates himself before a superior being with a sense of respect, awe, reverence, honor, and homage. In a Christian context, we simply apply this to God. We bow before God and prostrate ourselves before Him in respect and honor, paying Him the glory due His superior character.

Essentially, then, worship is giving . . . giving honor and respect to God. That is why we, as Christians, gather together on Sunday. We don't gather to give respect to the preacher or those in the choir, we gather to give honor to God. The sermon and the music are just to be the stimuli which create the desire in our hearts to honor Him. So, if you attend church for what you can get (i.e., to “get a blessing”), you've missed it! When we gather together to worship the Lord, our focus is to be on giving to Him, not getting *from* Him. Worship is a consuming desire to give to God, and it involves the giving of ourselves, our heart attitudes, and our possessions.

B. Worship Depicted

Let me illustrate this idea of worship as giving to God:

1. THE FRAGRANCE OF THE TABERNACLE'S INCENSE

Exodus 30:34-38 provides a graphic illustration of worship. God gave many instructions regarding how worship was to be carried out in the Tabernacle. Many of the instructions had great symbolic value and were used as teaching tools. One of these visual aids, described in Exodus 30:34-38, gives us a wonderful insight into the area of worship:

“And the LORD said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight. And thou shalt make it a perfume, a perfume after the art of the perfumer, tempered together, pure and holy [i.e., unique, separate, and untouched by any other elements]: And thou shalt beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with thee: it shall be unto you most holy.” Now this perfume, which was actually a sweet-smelling incense, was to be used only in the Tabernacle. Why? Because it was to be holy. Verse 37 continues, *“And as for the perfume which thou shalt make, ye shall not make it to yourselves according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto thee holy for the Lord. Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people.”* Now, did you know there was a perfume recipe in the Bible? It was probably the most lovely fragrance imaginable, but God said that it could cost them their life if they made it for themselves.

You say, “Well, what’s the point?” The point is this:

Here was a fragrance designed to be only for God. When this incense rose to God’s nostrils, it was unique to Him. This is a beautiful picture of worship, showing that worship is to be a unique, separated, sanctified, holy act that rises out of a person’s heart to the very nostrils of God.

2. THE FRAGRANCE OF MARY’S OINTMENT

As the fragrance of the incense in the Tabernacle rose to the nostrils of God, it signified worship. In John 12:1-3, another fragrant gift was offered in worship. However, this time it was offered to the living God in human form — the Lord Jesus Christ:

“Then Jesus, six days before the passover, came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, who had been dead, whom He raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper, and Martha served; but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with Him. Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly [probably a year’s wages], and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the odor of the ointment.” Mary used that which was her glory, her hair (cf. I Cor. 11:15), to wash the dusty, dirty feet of Jesus. And she didn’t use water, she used a costly, fragrant ointment. That’s the essence of worship. It’s self-humiliating and profuse in its giving.

Mary and Martha were different. Martha was always serving, and Mary was always sitting at the feet of Jesus. In fact, Jesus had previously said that what Mary chose to do was better than all of Martha’s serving (cf. Lk. 10:38-42). But when Judas saw what Mary did with the ointment, he said, *“Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred denarii, and given to the poor?”* (v. 5). Verse 6 tells us that Judas didn’t really care about the poor, he just wanted the money for himself. So Jesus said to him, *“Let her alone. . . . For the poor always ye have with you, but Me ye have not always”* (vv. 7a, 8). In other words, it’s better to worship than to give welfare. What we give God is infinitely more important than what we give to man . . . any man. Now I’m not saying that it’s not important to give to our fellow man, but it’s *more* important to give to God.

We tend to be so pragmatic, don't we? We are a generation of Marthas — always busy. We have the church fine-tuned to a system, with all of its programs and activities. And we are very careful not to waste our substance; so much so, that even what we give to God we tend to mark out very carefully, rather than to pour out that which is a year's wages and to stoop in humility to wipe His feet with our hair.

Mary's act was an act of true worship. As the fragrance rose from her ointment, it portrayed the essence of a worshiping heart. That's what God is after. True worship is better than welfare and religious activity. Although those things are necessary and good, worship is better. And yet, I fear that many of us don't even know what worship is.

C. Worship Distinguished

I think a comparison of worship with ministry might help to distinguish what true worship really is. Ministry is that which *comes down* to us from the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit, to one another in the form of spiritual gifts. Worship, on the other hand, is that which *goes up* from us, by the Spirit's power, through the Son, to the Father. Thus, ministry is that which *descends* from God to us; while worship is that which *ascends* from us to God. And both must be in perfect balance. Unfortunately, we tend to be too ministry oriented (like Martha), and not oriented enough toward worship. We need to learn from Mary how to sit at Jesus' feet and worship Him.

Ask yourself the following questions: "Do I worship God? Is worship a priority for me? Do I faithfully and regularly attend church with a deep heart commitment to worship God? Am I so consumed with a hungering desire to worship God, that I hurry myself into the assembly of His people for the expression of worship?" Well, God seeks acceptable, true, spiritual worship; and if we're going to give it to Him, we must understand what it is. Let's begin by looking at

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF WORSHIP

A. Scripture Is Dominated With It

The first reason that worship is important is because Scripture speaks so frequently of it. The Word of God emphasizes the theme of worship hundreds and hundreds of times, but I just want to pick out a few select passages to illustrate its priority:

1. OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES

a. *The Emphasis of the First Commandment* (Ex. 20)

When God began to lay down some standards, principles, and guidelines in the form of commandments, statutes, ordinances, laws, and propositions . . . what was it that was most important to Him? Notice the first commandment that He gave: "*I am the LORD thy God, who have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them; for I, the LORD thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep my commandments*" (vv. 2-6). The first commandment, then, is to worship God and God alone. That is our priority (cf. Ex. 34:14; Mt. 22:37).

b. *The Establishment of the Tabernacle* (Ex. 25)

When God called His people out of Egypt and they began to wander in the wilderness, He wanted them to focus on worshipping Him, so He established a place for this worship to occur – the Tabernacle. To give you an idea of the priority that God put on this place of worship, consider that it took seven chapters (a total of 243 verses) for God to discuss all the standards, measurements, and furnishings that were to be a part of the Tabernacle, and it only took thirty-one verses to describe the whole creation of the universe.

The Tabernacle itself was not very attractive, but inside the holy of holies, which was inside the holy place, was the ark of the covenant. On top of the ark was the mercy seat, where the high priest sprinkled blood once a year as an atonement for the sins of the people. It was on this mercy seat that the Shekinah glory of God dwelt, or tabernacled. In Exodus 25:22, God told Moses, “*And there will I meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.*” God gave them the Tabernacle as a focal point of worship because worship was the priority.

c. The Encampment around the Tabernacle (Num. 1:52-2:2)

It’s interesting to see how God arranged the encampment of Israel during the forty years of wandering. Every time the children of Israel stopped to set up camp, the priests were to be closest to the Tabernacle; just beyond the priests were the Levites; and the twelve tribes made up the outer ring. Now the priests were in charge of worship, while the other Levites were in charge of the service, the caring of the Tabernacle. It’s obvious that the priority was that of worship.

Even the age requirement for a priest showed the importance of worship. When a young man reached the age of twenty, he could serve as a soldier (Num. 1:3). A Levite could begin to serve the Tabernacle when he reached the age of twenty-five (Num. 8:24). But a Levite had to be thirty before he could become a priest (Num. 4:3). Why? Because worship was the priority. It demanded the highest level of spiritual maturity because it was the greatest responsibility. There was one level for those who fought the battles, and another for those who served in the Tabernacle — but the highest level was for those who brought the people to worship God.

d. The Example of the Seraphim (Isa. 6:1-2)

In Isaiah 6:1-2, Isaiah says, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly.” It’s interesting that four of the wings were related to worship, and only two were related to service. Each one of the seraphim covered his face because he couldn’t look upon God’s glory, he covered his feet because of God’s holy presence, and with the remaining two wings he took care of the service. Worship is the priority — even for the angels.

e. The Exhortation of the Psalmist (Ps. 95:6-7a)

In Psalm 95:6-7a it says, “*Oh, come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our maker. For He is our God.*” This is just one of many such Psalms which exhort us to worship (cf. Ps. 5:7; 29:2; 45:11; 66:4; 86:9; 96:9; 99:5, 9; 132:7; 138:2).

2. NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES

a. Romans 12:1-2

In the first eleven chapters of Romans, Paul talks about the marvelous gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, His redemptive purpose and plan for the world, and His mercy on sinful man. Then he says, “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God [all the truths of the first eleven chapters], that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service [lit. ‘spiritual worship’]” (v. 1).*

Now, after eleven chapters of doctrine defining the Christian and all of his benefits, Paul says, “In response to all of this, God wants something from you.” Do you know what it is? Spiritual worship which is acceptable to Him. The word “acceptable” is an important word of sacrifice and worship. Anyone who worships seeks to bring God that which is acceptable. This word also appears at the end of verse 2: “*..... that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*”

What does God want out of a believer? He wants acceptable, spiritual worship. And it begins with the presentation of the body as a living sacrifice. Now, it's not just the *physical* body, because then it wouldn't be an act of *spiritual* worship. The body referred to in verse 1 is the whole person, the true self. So, because of God's great mercy to us, He calls on us to present ourselves to Him in an act of spiritual worship. Simply put, God saved us so that we might truly and acceptably worship Him.

b. **I Peter 2:5**

Chapter 1 contains the wonders of redemptive grace. For example, verse 19 talks about "*the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot,*" verse 18 talks about our new birth, and verses 2-3 of chapter 2 talk about "*newborn babes*" who "*have tasted that the Lord is gracious.*" Now, as saved individuals, 2:5 says, "*Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.*"

God doesn't live in a house made with hands in a building made of brick and mortar. He lives in a house made of the living stones of His people. And as holy priests, we are to offer up spiritual sacrifices. Acceptable, true, spiritual worship is offered on the basis of God's transforming work in Christ.

So, that's a brief look at the first reason why worship is important: Scripture is dominated with it. The second reason why worship is important is because

B. Destiny Is Determined By It

Worship is not an addendum to life, it is at life's core. You see, the people who worship God acceptably, enter into eternal life; but the people who do not worship God acceptably, enter into eternal death. Worship, then, becomes the core. Time and eternity are determined by the nature of a person's worship.

Now, there are only two kinds of worship that can be offered: acceptable or unacceptable worship. The majority of the world offers unacceptable worship, and God will not accept it. The Bible is explicit on this. There are people today who say that ultimately everybody is going to be saved, but that is not true. The Bible does not say that. But it does say that there are only two kinds of worship: acceptable or unacceptable worship.

1. UNACCEPTABLE WORSHIP

a. The Worship of False Gods

People say, "What about all the people who worship their own god because they don't know any better? Surely God will accept them if they're sincere in their worship, won't He?" No! It is unacceptable to God to worship a non-god because He is a jealous God and will not tolerate the worship of another (cf. Ex. 34:14; Isa. 48:11b).

The world worships false gods. Look at Romans 1. In verse 21a we read: ". . . *when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful . . .*" Now frankly, that just means that they wouldn't worship Him or give Him glory, praise, thanks, homage, or adoration. They refused to worship God, which is unacceptable, so He "*gave them up to uncleanness*" (v. 24), "*unto vile affections*" (v. 26), and ultimately to their judgement (v. 32). In fact, when they refused to worship God, they began to make images "*like corruptible man, and birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things*" (v. 23). In other words, they turned to idols.

Everybody worships. So when men reject God, they will worship false gods — gods of their own creation. These false gods basically fall into two categories:

1) *Earthly/Material gods*

An example of an earthly or material god is the god of wealth. This is illustrated in Job 31:24-28: "If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence; if I rejoiced because my wealth was great, and because mine hand had gotten much; if I beheld the sun when it shined, or the moon walking in brightness; and my heart hath been secretly enticed, or my mouth hath kissed my hand, this also was an

iniquity to be punished by the judge; for I should have denied the God who is above.” In other words, if I worship what I possess, if I worship my little world, if I go around kissing my own hand, I’ve denied God. But men do that, and worship the gods of the material world.

2) *Heavenly/Supernatural gods*

Deuteronomy 4:14-19a gives us an illustration of this. As the children of Israel were preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses gave them the following warning: “*And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances, that ye might do them in the land which ye go over to possess. Take ye, therefore, good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude [i.e. form, representation, or image] on the day that the LORD spoke unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire; lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a carved image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air, the likeness of anything that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth; and lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them . . .*”

God is never to be reduced to an image never! Now if you think of God as an old man with a beard, sitting in a big chair that’s bad. Someone once said that idolatry doesn’t begin with a hammer, it begins with the mind. When someone *conceives* of God in improper terms, he will ultimately cause God to be *made* in improper terms. The idolater who takes his hammer and chisel, and forms a god out of wood, forms the god that’s in his mind to begin with. We shouldn’t have a visual conception of God whatsoever, because He’s never to be reduced to an image. To do so is unacceptable worship.

So, the first kind of unacceptable worship is the worship of false gods. And throughout the Old Testament this is condemned. I want to draw our thoughts to a conclusion by looking at Isaiah 2:6-10. Here is Isaiah’s commentary on what was happening among his people: “*Therefore, thou hast forsaked Thy people, the house of Jacob, because they are filled with customs from the east, and are soothsayers like the Philistines, and they please themselves in the children of foreigners [i.e., they had allowed the foreigners and their foreign gods to invade their thinking and worship]. Their land also is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures; their land is also full of horses, neither is there any end of their chariots; their land also is full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made. And the mean [lit. ‘common’] man boweth down, and the great man humbleth himself; therefore, forgive them not. Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of His majesty.*” God’s people became idolatrous. They even worshiped the sun (Ezk. 8:16). The pagans worshiped anything they could think of and the same thing is true today. Every religion that doesn’t rightly discern God, worships a false god. Every materialist, every irreligious atheist, and every agnostic who wouldn’t even darken the door of religion, worships some material god of his own invention, even if it’s himself. It’s all unacceptable to God. . . it damns the soul.