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Worship in Spirit and Truth

need our worship. Paul told the Athenians on Mars Hill that God “*does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things*” (Acts 17:24-25). Yet He does *desire* our worship. Jesus said, “*The Father seeks [people] to be His worshipers*” (John 4:23). However, just because God *seeks* worshipers does not mean that He will accept just *any* worship that men might offer to Him. When Jesus was traveling from Judea to Galilee, He stopped to rest beside a well in Samaria (John 4:1-6). While He was there, a Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well and Jesus asked her for a drink (John 4:7). This was an unusual request – it even surprised the woman – since “*Jews have no dealings with Samaritans*” (John 4:9). But this conversation led to an important discussion about *worship*. It was a lesson needed by the Samaritans, the Jews, and also by us today. After the woman perceived Jesus to be a prophet (John 4:19), she mentioned the difference between the worship of the Jews and the Samaritans to see what Jesus had to say about it. Jesus’ answer came down to this statement: “*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth*” (John 4:24).

Understanding Jesus’ Statement

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If we are to understand Jesus' statement, we need to understand three key terms:

- **Worship** – In his lexicon, J.H. Thayer defined this word as “to kiss the hand to (towards) one, in token of reverence” and “kneeling...in order to express respect or to make supplication.” We see from the definition that worship is a deliberate action. It is not something that is done inadvertently or by accident. One might trip and fall on their knee in front of someone else, but that would not mean they were kneeling before that person as a sign of respect. Worship involves both *action* (the act that is performed) and *purpose* (the intent by which the act is done).
- **Spirit** – The word translated spirit is used in several ways in the New Testament. When Jesus spoke of worshipping “*in spirit*,” He was referring to our inner being. Thayer described it as “the power by which the human being feels, thinks, decides.” Remember that worship involves action and *purpose*. Our spirit (the inner man – mind and heart) must be involved as we worship. When we sing, we make melody with our heart (Ephesians 5:19). When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we must rightly discern the Lord's body (1 Corinthians 11:29). When we give, we do so as we have purposed in our heart (2 Corinthians 9:7). Worship is not done *mindlessly* or else it is not really worship.
- **Truth** – Truth is that which is correct and certain. It is an *objective* standard. As Jesus prayed to the Father, He identified the word of God as truth (John 17:17). Again, worship involves *action* and purpose. The acts that we perform in worship must be in harmony with the truth – the word of God. Therefore, our worship services are to be patterned after what we see in the New Testament – singing (Colossians 3:16), praying (Acts 2:42), teaching (Acts 20:7); and on the first day of the week, observing the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7) and giving (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Worship may be heart-felt and sincere, but it is in vain if we do not perform the acts of worship that have been handed down to us in the New Testament.

Understanding these terms, let us look again at what Jesus meant by His statement. First, He said, “*God is spirit*.” God is not a man.

Therefore, we should not expect to please Him as we would please men (or ourselves). When it comes to our worship, this means that we must not think that just because people are pleased with what we do, then God will also be pleased. Musical instruments may sound good, a Scriptureless message may be motivational, and testimonials may be emotionally moving. But who are we trying to please? Paul wrote, *“For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ”* (Galatians 1:10). Many of the churches of men try to tailor their worship services after what is desired by the members or what would appeal to those in the community. But for us in the Lord’s church, we need to remember that our worship is for God, not for any man. Second, Jesus said, *“Those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”* His point was that our worship to God must have the right *action* and the right *purpose*. We must worship *from the heart* – not just “going through the motions” or to be seen of others. We must also worship *from the word* – by His authority and according to the pattern.

Parallel Old Testament Passage

There is a statement in the Old Testament that is similar to Jesus’ statement to the Samaritan woman at the well. When Joshua challenged the people to *“choose...whom you will serve”* (Joshua 24:15), he was not leaving it up to them *how* they would serve God. He told them how: *“Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord”* (Joshua 24:14). Joshua said, *“Serve [the Lord] in sincerity and truth”* (Joshua 24:14). Jesus said, *“Worship in spirit and truth”* (John 4:24). These statements mean the same thing. Their worship to God needed to have the right *action* and *purpose*; the right *practice* and *attitude*. In fact, Joshua’s statement elaborated a bit further on what it meant to do this. He said, *“Fear the Lord.”* This was part of the *attitude*. We cannot serve God acceptably without godly fear (Hebrews 12:28). He also told them they needed to put away all foreign gods. This was part of the *practice*. We cannot have our worship be mixed with elements from God’s law and the inventions of men. We are to *“observe all that [Jesus] commanded”* (Matthew 28:20) without also submitting to *“decrees...in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men”* (Colossians 2:20-22).

The Lesson for Us

The lesson that we need to take from Jesus' statement to the woman at the well is that God has *always* had a certain expectation of man's worship/service/devotion. Worship had to be done "*in spirit and truth*" (John 4:24) – the right *action* and the right *purpose*. What did that mean for the Jews and the Samaritans? Worshiping "*in Jerusalem*" alone did not make the Jews' worship acceptable and worshiping as their "*fathers worshiped*" did not make the Samaritans' worship right (John 4:20-21). Both failed to live up to God's standard (cf. 2 Kings 23:19; Amos 5:21-23; Malachi 1:10; et al.) and they needed to repent. The requirement to worship "*in spirit and truth*" was not a new requirement that would come in the future when the Lord established His kingdom. True, the law would be new (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 10:8-9; Micah 4:2); but the expectation of God for man to "*worship in spirit and truth*" (John 4:24) would be the same. Jesus said, "*But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth*" (John 4:23). They needed to worship according to the law that was in force at that time. Then later, they would need to worship according to the standard of Christ's new law when that hour came. What does this mean for us? The hour which Jesus said would be coming (John 4:23) – the establishment of His kingdom and the new law – has come. We need to "*worship in spirit and truth*" (John 4:24) according to the pattern that is found in the New Testament (Acts 2:42; Colossians 3:16-17). We must perform the right *actions* and do so for the right *purpose*. We must engage in the right *practice* with the right *attitude*. If we are not meeting this standard, then like the Jews and Samaritans, we need to repent.

Conclusion

God desires our worship, but does not *need* our worship. He will not accept whatever we offer Him, but only what He has said He will accept. Therefore, if we wish to please God, we must worship as He has *always* expected man to worship – "*in spirit and truth*" (John 4:24; cf. Joshua 24:14). —*Andy Sochor*

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Service times:

Sunday morning Worship: 9:00am

We are currently meeting just once on Sunday morning due to the situation with the Coronavirus. We hope to get back to a more normal schedule in the future.

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