

GOD-PLEASING WORSHIP

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Foreword

Our kids played and sang in youth worship bands when they were younger. That brought teens, instruments and loud music into our house at all hours. We loved it - most of the time!

One of my sweetest memories is sitting on my son's bed as he played guitar and singing together:

I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about You
It's all about You, Jesus

I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it
When it's all about You
It's all about You, Jesus

This book, based on a sermon series by my good friend, Joe Talone (now in Heaven), will bring you back to the heart of worship. It speaks to believers, churches, and pastors. It cuts through the thing we've made church worship and helps us refocus on God-honoring, Spirit-motivated, Bible-centered worship. It's a breath of fresh air in the worship fog of too many churches. Read it carefully and prayerfully. Consider what our God says to us and what He calls us to in our worship. Then put it into practice in your own life and church. Your Father and Savior will be pleased as you do.

A word about the organization of this book: I transcribed the audio recordings of Joe's messages and adapted them to the written word, careful to retain Joe's original wording and tone as much as possible. In the final section of the book, I restated Joe's specific suggestions for his church (Fardale Trinity Church in Mahwah, New Jersey) to more general suggestions for any church. I trust that change increases the impact of this book - for the good of Jesus' church and the glory of our God.

Ken MacGillivray
Saginaw, Michigan

Chapter I

What Is Worship?

When we talk about worship, people usually think about music. In a way, we church leaders set you up for that, don't we? We have a "worship team," and what do they do? They sing. So you think, "Yeah, okay, worship is the music." According to the Bible, there's a whole lot more to worship than music - though music is a key component in worship and music can be worship. In the Bible, other things besides music are worship. In the Old Testament, God's people would bring an animal, slit its throat, lay their hands on the animal's head, and confess their sin. They did that at the gate of the tabernacle and later at the temple. That was an act of worship.

Do you remember when Joshua confronted Achan for stealing the things that were under ban? They cast lots and it came down to Achan. Joshua told him, "Glorify God and confess your sin." (Joshua 7:19) So the confession of sin is an act of worship. It's how we acknowledge our guilt and turn to Him.

Do you know that the reading of Scripture is an act of worship? In the Old Testament, people gather together in an assembly and read the Scripture. That's why Paul wrote to Timothy not to neglect the public reading of Scripture. So reading the Bible out loud in our Sunday services is worship. Did you realize that listening to a sermon also is worship? Jesus told us that we should love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. So when you listen to a sermon - when you listen to the Word of God taught - that is an act of worship.

In the Old Testament as a worshipper of God, you would bring your gifts and tithes. A *tithe* is the 10% that you owe God. He said that if you don't pay it, you're stealing from Him. Beyond that 10%, you could bring an offering or gift. You would bring your tithe and offerings in the form of currency, livestock or something you grew. So you would actually bring something to God. That's an act of worship. When I announce the offering in our church services, I explain that the offering is an act of worship and it is an act of partnership. If that's how you understand it, then you are welcome to participate in it. Many elements of worship go into a worship service. We need to understand why those things are considered worship and how God views them.

How many times have you heard someone say, "Oh, the Spirit was really moving today!" I remember once talking with another minister who went into an assembly, and, boy, did they have loud music. Everyone was singing and really going for it! He said to me, "The Spirit is really

moving here!” He thought the Spirit was moving because people were singing loud and swaying. Is that a measure of the Spirit being present? Don't people do that at concerts all the time? We yell, sing and sway at football games and baseball games. Is there a connection between volume, bodily posture, motions and worship? Is there a necessary connection? Just putting those activities in a house of worship, or church, does that make it worship? *What makes it worship?* I would love for you to think carefully with me about what makes worship *worship*. What constitutes it? Why do we call it worship, and how does God feel about it?

Have you ever heard someone say, “I really didn't get anything out of the service this morning”? Have you ever said, “Yeah, I really didn't like that song”? What's the reference point in a worship service? Is the way to measure it what you get out of it? Or is the way to measure it what God gets out of it? Who is it from, and who is it to? Is the song meant for you? Or is meant for God? That said, is it unreasonable to expect that you should get something out of worship? We have a lot of questions to think through if we want to be the kind of worshipers that please God.

Everyone on the planet is a worshiper. Over 7 billion people live on this earth, and 6.5 billion of them have a religion. They do something deity-ward that they view as worship. In reality, the half billion people who say they don't believe in a god worship, too. They don't call it that, but they worship. So we need to think this through carefully. If we're going to answer our questions about worship, we need to turn to the Bible.

Chapter 2

A Conversation About Worship

In John chapter 4, Jesus interacts with a Samaritan woman and the conversation turns to worship. What the Lord says here gives us a foundation for understanding worship that pleases God.

Now Jesus had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.[a])

10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

11 "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

16 He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

17 "I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

19 "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

21 “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

25 The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

26 Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. (John 4:3-27)

I encourage you to watch this interaction on the Gospel of John video, if possible. When we read the Bible, we’re looking at black letters on a white page. But it's really cool how we can reenact a scene with modern technology. I love the movies that take it right out of the Bible. They're hard to come by, I know, but they're out there.

Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman is highly instructive for us if we want to understand worship that pleases God. Think with me about four points on worship from these verses:

1. What the Samaritan woman THOUGHT about worship
2. What Jesus TAUGHT about worship
3. What's NEW about worship since the coming of the Messiah
4. What does GOD want in a worshipper? What is God-pleasing worship?

First, a little background. Jesus prepares this woman to receive living water - symbolic of the new life which comes from the Holy Spirit - by pointing her to her sin. She says, *Give me this water!* She’s thinking, “I don't have to come back here and fill my water pot.” Jesus responds with, “Okay. Go call your husband.”

It's interesting what Jesus did. He pointed this woman to her sin. But rather than say, “You're right, Mr. Prophet. I have sinned. I need forgiveness and cleansing,” she responded by changing the subject. She turned to the popular debate between Jews and Samaritans. She punted to a theological issue that she thought was a safe distraction from where Jesus was driving their conversation. She

tried to change the subject from her sin and her need to repent by bringing up this big issue of worship. Do the Samaritans have it right? We worship here on Mount Gerazim. Or do the Jews have it right? They worship in Jerusalem.

You will find that people do the same thing today when you explain the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. So many people turn the discussion to something that they're really not interested in, but that they think has no answer like the problem of evil, the problem of suffering or the fate of those who have never heard. When you start talking about sin and the need to turn from it to Jesus for cleansing and forgiveness, people often jump from the discussion of the gospel to the grand questions. They think these questions have no answer, but they are very effective for getting off the topic of their sin and their need to turn to Jesus for forgiveness from it.

Jesus took this woman's rabbit trail and steered it right back to her heart. What could be more central to a person than that to which you ascribe great worth? That's what worship means. Jesus says, "Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . .," and within a sentence or two, he's right back to talking with her about God's Holy Spirit and God's Holy Word. She was so moved by his clear content, his kind manner and his authoritative teaching that she wonders whether or not he could be the Messiah.

Chapter 3

What She Thought About Worship

What did the Samaritan woman think about worship? She begins with, “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is Jerusalem.” She thinks the focus of worship is a **place** - for her Mount Gerizim in Samaria. At various times throughout history, Mount Gerazim had been a significant place of worship. People had built a temple and other buildings there. Jacob's well was there. But worship that God approves focuses on **personal relationship**, not so much on rituals, relics and buildings. She's a little off base.

She also thinks **the act of worshipping** is enough. She says, We worship here, you worship there, but she didn't say *what* she worshipped. There's a noticeable absence of an object of worship. When Jesus answers the question, he makes the object of worship clear - God. She's talking about worship in general. She's not talking about worshipping Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Some people come to church and sing, but they're not really singing to the Lord in their thinking. When you sing in a worship service, are you just singing or are you singing *to the Lord*? What does it look like that you're singing to the Lord of all creation, He who sits enthroned above angels? When you sing to Him, what does that look like on your face? How does that sound in your voice? Are you singing to the Lord or are you just singing? The Samaritan woman was worshipping, but she wasn't worshipping Yahweh in truth. The act of worshipping by itself is not enough.

To worship is to attribute great worth to an object or person. Often it involves literally bowing down, prostrating oneself and submitting oneself in deep reverence as an outward expression of an inner attitude of submission and humble respect. We ascribe to the Lord the supreme worth to which he alone is worthy. Worship is to him. It's about him. The Lord is the supreme one to whom we give our worship. At least, we should.

The “me-ism” of people today led to a pivotal shift in worship during the 20th century. Men and women today view worship through the lens of how it makes them feel. The focus of worship has shifted from God to the feeling it gives *me*. Many people now assess the worshipfulness of a worship service based on how much it emotionally moves them. But from the beginning, worship was not that way. From Old Testament times, the focus of worship was Yahweh not us.

Church leaders have bought into this shift. As church became a matter of marketing and market share, church leaders worked to give consumers (members and attenders) the products and

services they want. What many want is music that makes them feel good and sermons that make them feel good. So we don't talk much about sin, confession and repentance anymore. We talk about love and grace - how God loves you and cares about you and encourages you. We talk a lot about Heaven, but don't say a word about hell. Most modern preaching aims at keeping the religious consumer a customer by giving him what he wants. And the music is all about keeping the customer happy. You're the audience. Worship teams call the platform a stage, and many think of music in the church as a performance.

This shift happened when individualism became king. It used to be that your family was important. Now it's *me* that's important. God used to be the focus of worship, but now we assess worship based on how it makes me feel and what I get out of it. We sing four songs on a Sunday morning at our church, and someone will come up and complain: "You know, I really don't like that third song." It wasn't to you or for you. It was to Him and for Him. The question is not whether you like it. The question is whether *He* liked it. Isn't it? That's the question.

But people are so *me* that it never occurred to them that God's preferred style of songs isn't theirs. Of course, what God likes best is what I like best. It doesn't even occur to them that He may have a whole other standard for what makes worship pleasing or acceptable than their preferred instruments or musical style. The me-ism of modern culture has done a lot of damage to worship in the church.

The Samaritan woman was off base. She thought the focus of worship was a place. She thought the act of worship was enough. Jesus teaches her that it isn't.

Chapter 4

What Jesus Taught About Worship

Jesus told the Samaritan woman:

A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth. (John 4:21-24)

Jesus taught that the focus of worship is a *Person*, not a place. Worship has a recipient. Someone receives it. Jesus answered her question without choosing either of the standard options of the day - Mount Gerazim or Jerusalem. He said, "Not here or there." He taught her that the act of worship must be in accordance with what God has revealed in His Word. He told her, "You Samaritans worship what you do not know." Jesus was saying that it is possible to worship in ignorance. And He didn't say, "You're not sincere." He didn't say that. It's possible for us to worship in sincerity and still be wrong.

It's not a style issue. It's a substance issue. You may say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere." That is not what Jesus said. He doesn't give points for sincerity. He told this woman, "You don't know what you're worshipping." He didn't accommodate her false view in order to be accepted. He didn't fudge the differences. He was clear and kind. We who represent the Lord to others should be as clear and kind as He was with that woman at the well.

The world is full of people who are very sincere, and they're very wrong. The Samaritans were people like that. They were confused, and their worship was in error. Pagan worship is very sincere. Pagans would cut themselves - not the Samaritans but others pagans at that time. They would cut themselves and cry out to their gods. Talk about sincere! They would even sacrifice people they loved, such as their children, to their gods. Talk about sincere and committed! Yet they were totally wrong because they were not worshipping God in accordance to what He had revealed. A lot of people worship what they do not know. Their worship is not in accordance with God-revealed knowledge.

Worship that pleases God is directed toward God the Father through God the Son and in the power of God the Holy Spirit. It is not a style issue! You have to get away from thinking that one style is more worshipful than another. It's a substance issue. The Samaritan woman was interested in *where*. Jesus was interested in *Who* and in *what* - the object and the content of worship. God is not seeking worship in a particular style or a particular sound. He is seeking worship that is in Spirit and in truth. What does that mean? It refers to the Holy Spirit and to God's revealed truth.

So the question, *Did you like it?* is the wrong question. The question, *Did God like it?* Ah, that's the right question! If it was in Spirit and truth, then God loved it. If He was the object at whom the worship is aimed and if the content exalted and praised Him by being in harmony with His revealed truth, then, yes, the Lord liked it. If the worshipper is in union with His Spirit and in harmony with His Word, then, yes, the Lord liked it. The race, the place, the style, the sound of the worship - these are not the issue with God.

All over the world, Sunday is the Lord's Day. And people worship God in Spirit and in truth across the African plain, all over Asia, all over the world. These are people not wearing my style of clothing or playing my kind of instruments. But they're worshipping God. Do you know what we're doing? We're tuning up! We're just tuning up for the big concert. This is all just practice for Heaven.

In Revelation chapters five and seven, the Apostle John was given the unspeakable privilege of peaking into Heaven. He saw You all races of people from all places on Earth at at all times in history worshipping God together. They sang a new song with these words:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to break its seals and to open it. For you were slaughtered and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have caused them to become a kingdom of priests for our God. They will reign on the earth. Then I looked good again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and the living beings and the elders. (Revelation 5:9-11)

Two chapters later:

After this, I saw a vast crowd too great to count - people from every nation, every tribe, every people, every language standing in front of the throne before the lamb. They were clothed in white robes. They held palm branches in their hands, and they were shouting with a mighty shout: Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb. All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living beings and

they fell down before the throne faces to the ground and they worshiped God. (Revelation 7:9-11)

Can you imagine that amazing scene? Actually you can because what you're doing now in this life is taking part in a choir and tuning up for what you will do forever. And there are other voices in the choir that aren't the same as yours. There are other instruments in the orchestra that are not the same as yours. God doesn't particularly favor your style and your instrument any more than anyone else's. What pleases Him is that it's coming from people who are filled with His Spirit and the things they are saying are content-loaded. They are in harmony with God's Word, His revealed truth.