The Heart of Worship

December 3, 2017

Every week, somewhere around 2.2 billion people around the world gather together to do what we are doing here today. These people, who are from every different country, language, and culture you can think of all come together to do one thing: to worship the one true God together.

Worship is one of the things that ties us together as brothers and sisters in Christ from all around the world. It is what we gather together to do every week, and it’s a huge part of what we do as followers of Jesus.

Since worship is such a big part of what we do as a body of believers, it’s important that we understand it, that we know why we do it, and what it is all about. Because worship is about far more than just being entertained by the songs that we sing for an hour once a week, and it’s certainly more than hearing a guy like me or Rod talk for a while.

Before we go any further, we need to define worship, we need to figure out what it is that we are talking about when we talk about worship. For many people, worship is simply this hour of time on a Sunday morning, for some it’s a genre of music that they listen to.

If we go back to the good old Webster’s dictionary, we find out that our word for worship comes from an Old English word that they used to talk about the worth or the worthiness of something, or having respect for something or someone. As time went on, it became a way they talked about the worth of God, or the respect they had for God.

So, the first thing that we can say about worship is that it is all about acknowledging the worth of something, or someone, and for us, that someone is God.

Webster’s calls worship “an extravagant respect or admiration for or devotion to an object of esteem”. Of course, for us, that is more than just an object, it is God himself that we respect, admire, and are devoted to.

The words in the Bible that are translated as worship in our Bibles today mean things like to bow down, to pay homage to, to show reverence for, to show devotion to, to serve, and one that I think gives us a vivid picture of what worship is, to seek with care. All of those things put us below the one that we worship, they make it clear that the one that we are worshiping is greater than us, he is bigger than us, he is in authority over us.

That’s a big part of what worship is: acknowledging the worth, the glory, and the majesty of the one that we worship, and recognizing our humble position before him.

Worship is when a person is totally absorbed in communion with God, when all other distractions go away and that person is totally connected with God, totally captivated by their relationship with God. Worship is when you do anything that enhances or expresses your understanding of God’s supremacy and your position of submission to him.

Worship is one of the spiritual disciplines because it is a way of acting and a way of living that puts us before God and allows him to do his work of transforming us. It is how humanity comes into the presence of God, and that is why worship is so vital to our lives as Christians.

William Temple said, “To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.”

Worship is not just about singing songs about God. Worship could be praise and singing, it could be silence, it could be time spent in prayer, it could be time spent studying the Bible. The issue of how you worship is far less important than whether you are honoring and glorifying God by what you do.

In fact, if you read through the NT, you won’t find a single scripture that tells us that we should worship in any particular manner. It doesn’t say to worship God by singing along with a piano, or worship God by clapping your hands to the music on Sunday morning.

So, the way in which we worship God is not unimportant, but it is secondary. What is far more important, most important in worship, is that we come to a place where we let our heart touch the Spirit of God. The different forms of worship only help us get there, they only lead us to a place where we can worship God freely. In that sense, anything that we do can become an act of worship.

The best example I know of someone with this kind of attitude about worship, outside of Jesus, is a man named Brother Lawrence who was a monk in Paris in the 1600’s. Brother Lawrence worked in the kitchen of the monastery, so his job, day in and day out, was to cook for the other monks there, and clean up from meals.

For most people, this was the most menial job in the monastery. When others were writing, gardening, or doing other things, Brother Lawrence was slaving away in the kitchen. But he never complained, never saw it as a burden. In fact, he used it as a time of worship. He strove to worship God through everything that he did, even if it was scrubbing pots and pans.

Eventually, his time worshiping God in the kitchen was every bit as meaningful as his time in the sanctuary. He said, “For me the time of activity does not differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are together calling for as many different things, I possess God in as great a tranquility as when upon my knees at the blessed Sacrament.”

A man who knew him well wrote down some of Brother Lawrence’s wisdom and the way he lived his life in a book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. He said, “In the end, habit became so much second nature that it was in a way impossible for him to turn away from God and busy himself with other matters.” That is a description of someone who lived a life of worship, someone who saw every act, every chore, every menial task, as a way of serving and worshiping God.

And before you think, “Well, yeah, but this guy was a monk, it was his job to be close to God”, let me read you the very beginning of the book. “In these pages, you will not find set out a devotion that is merely speculative, or that can only be practiced in a cloister. No, there is an obligation laid on every person to worship God and love him, and we cannot carry out this solemn duty as we should unless our heart is knit in love to God, and our communion is so close as to constrain us to run to Him at every moment just like little children, who cannot stand upright without their mother’s arms of love.”

See, this is not just something for monks to practice, this is for everyone who follows Christ to strive for, constant worship of God. Worship is not to be something we do once a week. It is to be something we do every single day, with every breath we breath. So, if you only ever think of worship as singing in church on Sunday morning, then you have a good start. Now you need to broaden your view of what worship really is.

Worship is meant to be done in community with other believers. When we do that, we experience presence of Jesus in the midst of a gathered community. The author of Hebrews says in

**Hebrews 10:24–25 (NIV) — 24** And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **25** not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Isaac Pennington compares worshipping with other followers with the coals of a fire. One coal by itself will burn for a while, but eventually goes out. But put a dying coal in the presence of other live coals and you will soon find that once dying coal burning bright. It’s the same with our worship, by ourselves, we can do very little, but when we worship together, we become a body that breathes life into each other.

Worship is one of the things that helps us put our lives into perspective. It helps us to realize who God is, and realize who we are. We become keenly aware of the fact that we are created beings coming into the presence of the God who created us. And when we do, we become very aware of just how small we are in comparison to our creator.

True worship makes us bow down before God, exalt him, revere him, and praise him. It reorients our lives from focusing on ourselves and our lives, to focusing on God, where our focus and attention should be .

Both Isaiah and John had visions of God upon his throne, and in each case, they were blown away by the holiness and the majesty of God. When Isaiah truly saw God, he recognized who God was and how holy he was, and he also recognized how unworthy he was to be standing before him. Being in the presence of God, worshipping God, not only gave Isaiah a new perspective on God, and a new perspective on who he and his people were as well. We recognize our sinfulness in comparison with the holiness of God. John simply fell flat upon his face, because he was not worthy to stand before him. It is in worship that we see God for how holy and majestic he really is.

Because of what we know about God from the truth of Scripture, we know that he is the only one who is worthy of our worship. That means that all of our worship should be directed at God, and God alone. He is so much higher and greater than us that just being close to him should inspire us to do nothing but worship, and all the honor, all the glory, all the worthiness belongs to God. Listen to what Psalm 95says

**Psalm 95:1–7 ESV — 1** Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! **2** Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! **3** For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. **4** In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. **5** The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. **6** Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! **7** For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice,

Do you hear the focus on God, do you hear the call to worship God for who he is, to worship God alone above everyone and everything else. That is the idea behind worship.

But there are many people who do not acknowledge God for who he is, who end up worshiping other things or other people instead of the one true God. We have a lot of examples in the Bible of places where people, and often the Israelites themselves, worshiped things other than the one true God.

They acted as though these false gods, these idols, had the same worth and value as the one true God, and people still do that today. AW Tozer says, “The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of him.” When we have the wrong perspective of God, we are in danger of idolatry.

Now I think it’s safe to say that most of us don’t have little golden statues in our homes that we bow down to and make sacrifices to, but we all have things that can become idols in our life. Anything that we give the attention and devotion that God alone deserves in our life becomes an idol for us. That could be money, it could be celebrities or sports figures, it could be our jobs, success, power. It could even be the people in our life that we love the most. If anything has taken the place that only God deserves in your life, you have an idol.

The good news is that true worship of God puts that back into perspective. True worship will show us if there is anything else in our life that has bumped God out of his spot at the top. It reveals to us if we have been letting someone or something else have the worship that only God deserves.

For some people, worship is not about coming to give honor, and glory, and praise to God, but about something else entirely. Some people are simply going through the motions of their faith when they come to worship, but their hearts are not behind it. When they come into worship, they simply come to be entertained. They want a time to sing songs with each other and have a good time together. They want the same kind of things that you might get if you went to a concert or a get together with friends.

It’s not a bad thing to enjoy the music that you sing in worship of God, and it’s not bad to enjoy worshiping together with other people, but if that is all worship is to us, then we are missing the point. We all have our favorite songs, we all have our own preferences in worship, but when we make worship all about what we want and what we like, then we are focusing on the wrong thing.

When we focus on our preferences, or on the things we want to get out of worship, then we have taken the focus that should be on God alone, and we have turned it around on ourselves. Thom Rainer said, “When the preferences of the church members are greater than their passion for the Gospel, the church is dying.” True worship is not about us and our preferences at all, it’s all about giving glory, and praise, and adoration to God and God alone.

But sometimes worship is hard. Sometimes it’s hard to want to worship God. So what do we do then? Well, the short answer is worship anyway. For the long answer we go to Acts 16. Paul and Silas were on one of their missionary journeys in the city of Philippi, and they cast out a demon from a slave girl who made a good bit of money for her owners. So, the owners of this girl riled up the crowds, had Paul and Silas beaten, and then thrown into prison in Philippi – then we read this

**Acts 16:25–26 ESV — 25** About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, **26** and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened.

Now prison is obviously not a place you want to end up in today’s world – but prison during the first century was really not the place you wanted to end up, yet Paul ended up there often. Paul and Silas had just been beaten with rods in public. And with no mention of any kind of medical care, they were thrown into prison. Then, the jailer was ordered to keep them safely, so he put them in the inner prison and secured their feet in stocks.

So here were Paul and Silas, beaten and bloody, and locked in the most secure part of a prison in a foreign city. I don’t know about you, but if I were in prison at all, let alone these circumstances, I would not be a very cheerful person. But instead of being depressed, or angry, Paul and Silas took the opportunity to worship. They sang hymns, and the rest of the prisoners listened to them. Even in the most destitute of circumstances, even when they had no idea of what would happen to them, their first response was to worship God.

Do you think there were times that Paul and Silas didn’t want to worship God? Do you think maybe they were hurting and aching from being beaten, my guess is that they probably didn’t feel a whole lot like singing that night, but they sang hymns to God anyway.

But these men didn’t let what they were feeling at the moment, their fears, their insecurities, their aches and pains, get in the way of worshiping God. You see, if these guys had let what they were feeling at the moment get in the way of worshiping God, then that would have made their worship all about them. If we allow what we are feeling at any given moment to dictate whether or not we worship, then we are making worship all about us. The result of Paul and Silas refusing to do that was that the jailer and all his household were saved.

There will be times that you will not feel like worshipping God. When we chose to worship God anyway, we are offering what Richard Foster calls a sacrifice of worship. He says, “Many times I do not feel like worshipping and I have to kneel down and say, “Lord, I don’t feel like worshipping, but I desire to give you this time. It belongs to you. I will waste this time for you.”

If you’ve been married for any length of time, you know that sometimes your spouse is not your favorite person, and you don’t always feel very loving toward them. The key to a lasting marriage is to rely on that decision and that promise that you made to continue to love the other person, and that’s true even when you don’t feel like it.

Our love for God, and our worship of God, is very much the same. We don’t always feel like worshiping God, we don’t always feel like coming to church on Sunday mornings. But even when we don’t feel like it, we worship God because He is worthy of our praise, he is worthy of our worship, and there is no occasion that is the wrong time to worship God, not even with your feet in the stocks of a Philippian prison.

Worship is not about our feelings, but it is all about our hearts. Don’t confuse those two. We sometimes talk about the heart as the seat of emotions in us, where we feel things, and experience emotion. But the way the Bible talks about our hearts, it is not the seat of our emotions, but the seat of our decision making, it’s where we decide who we will be, what kind of people we want to be.

**Deuteronomy 6:5 ESV — 5** You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Jesus quoted that as the greatest commandment. This is one of the keys to following God faithfully. And that means deciding in your heart to love God, to worship God. There is no mention of feelings there at all.

So, worship is something that we decide in our hearts to do, not something we necessarily feel like doing at any given point. True worship is based around our resolve to worship God no matter what. God is not interesting in worship that is anything less than genuine, and genuine worship must come from our hearts.

**Isaiah 1:11–18 ESV — 11** “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. **12** “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? **13** Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. **…16** Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, **17** learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. **18** “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

**Hosea 6:6 ESV — 6** For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

God is not interested in the motions we go through unless our hearts are in it as well . God wanted more than just the rituals from the Israelites, and he wants more than that from us. You see, if our worship is anything less than genuine, then it doesn’t matter if we worship every day, it doesn’t matter what songs we sing. It is missing the most vital piece if God does not also have our hearts.

Worship is our response to the work of God in our life, it’s our response to God coming after us, our response to the love the God first showed us. We are not only worshipping a holy and glorious God, we are also worshipping the God who was tortured and died to set us free from our sin. Paul tells us the only response to that is to live a life of worship

**Romans 12:1 ESV — 1** I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

We truly worship God not when we give up one hour a week to sing songs to him, but when we live our lives, and do all that we do to bring honor and glory to God. When we stop living our lives for ourselves, and start living every moment for him instead.

We worship God because he is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and because he died to set us free from our sin. Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that even though not everyone acknowledges that right now, one day every knee will bow in worship of the one true God, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

For those who recognize and worship God for who he is, that will be a glorious day, because although right now we worship a God that we do not see with our eyes, on that day we will worship Him face to face.

But for those who choose not to acknowledge and worship God for who he is right now, or choose to worship other things, the day is coming when they will bow to him no matter what. That day will be a terror to them, because they will finally realize their mistake that has cost them eternity.

The God who created you wants to have a personal relationship with you. He wants you to know him and understand him, and he wants you to worship him in a way that is genuine and heartfelt, and not just going through the motions.

He loves us desperately, and he wants us to love him back just as desperately. And so, he made a way for us to be with him for eternity, by offering his only Son to pay the penalty for our sins. That is the God that created you, that is the God that loves you, and that is the God who is worthy of all your worship, now and forever.