

Spiritual Worship

In the name of him who is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, dear friends: To the Samaritan woman who asked him about the proper place to worship the Lord, Jesus replied, “The hour is coming when [the Father won’t be worshipped in any particular place, but rather] true worshippers will worship the Father *in spirit and in truth* ...”

I’m happy to report that the time for the worship of which Jesus spoke has long since arrived. We no longer have to travel to Jerusalem to worship the Lord in his elaborate marble Temple as the faithful did in Jesus’ day. Now, in the New Testament Era, the Lord comes to us and makes his presence known among us through his Word and Sacraments whenever as few as two or three gather in his name even in the humblest of places. So we can worship the Father anywhere. But what does it mean to worship the Father *in spirit and in truth*?

Taking worship in the truth first, the answer is easy. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” So there you go. You want to get to the Father? You want to worship him? You must do it through Jesus – specifically through the *truth* of Jesus—what you believe and confess about him. This is what Jesus is doing in today’s Gospel lesson. He’s asking the disciples, “Who do you say I that am?” He’s eliciting their confession of faith. He’s asking what they hold to be true about him. He’s heard from them what others are saying, that he’s John or Elijah or one of the prophets, none of which are true. And because what those folks believe about Jesus isn’t the truth, they have no access to the Father. They cannot worship him. They are in spiritual darkness, cut off from the light of God.

But speaking for the disciples, Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”. That’s it. They have the truth about Jesus. They believe and confess it. And so Jesus answers, “You are blessed”, that is, you’ve been given a gift. “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you”, which is to say, you didn’t figure it out with your natural wits and powers of observation; “but my Father in heaven”, *he’s* the guy who revealed this truth to you. He’s granted you access to him through me. Jesus goes on to say, “Upon this rock I will build my church” (and the word he uses implies a massive stone foundation). What rock is that? It’s the solid rock of truth about Jesus which Peter confessed: that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. That’s the foundation of truth. It’s the foremost fact that all the faithful must stand on. Because if you don’t believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, then you’re not in his church. And if you’re not in his church, you cannot worship God.

Of course, there’s more to the truth of Jesus than just he’s the Christ the Son of the Living God. That’s only the first of many critical truths the faithful must believe about him. The others, for the most part, we confess in the Creeds; expressly that in addition to being true God, Jesus is true man, that he was conceived by the Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and that he lived a sinless life as a man. It’s also necessary to believe that as true God and true man he made the atonement for our sin, which is why we confess that he suffered under Pontius Pilate, that he was crucified for our sins, that he died and was buried, that he rose on the third day, that he ascended into heaven, and that he is coming again to raise all who sleep in the dust of the earth and execute the final judgment upon all people: the righteous to go with him into eternal life and the wicked to be consigned to everlasting flames. These are the truths of Jesus that have been revealed by the Father. And only those who believe and live in these truths have access to the Father. Only they can stand before God forgiven, righteous, and holy by faith in Jesus.

So, all of that is entailed in what it means to worship the Father *in truth*; and we can thank the Lord that we have been blessed in that these truths have been revealed to us. But now, standing before the Father in the truth of Jesus his Son, what does it mean to worship the Father *in spirit*? The answer to that question may surprise you. I mean, the assumption is usually made that what's spiritual is an internal sort of thing. And since to worship in truth is largely a *mental* activity, that is, we hold the truths of Jesus in our minds; then the spiritual part of it, we think, must be about feelings and emotions, matters of the heart. Like it's one thing to *know* Jesus and confess him, and another *to feel* the right way about him – *that's* the spiritual part. So, when we come to Sunday services, we're looking for not just the objective truth in which we listen to the Word of God and then confess it; no, that's not enough. To worship in spirit means to have that powerful sense of euphoria or wellbeing or comfort or thankfulness or awe in God's presence or however else you care to describe it. And I think you know what I mean: certain passages of Scripture sometimes hit you just right; or maybe it's a verse in a hymn, or something the pastor says in a sermon – but it gets to you and you feel some kind of internal, mystical sensation, or you get all choked up, or whatever. *That*, we tend to think, is the spiritual part of worship.

And it's worth noting that much of what goes on today in many churches is designed precisely to provoke those kinds of feelings. They do it to create the sensation that you are having a powerful spiritual worship experience. And there's a basic formula to follow for it. They warm the congregation up with some gentle, sentimental, soft rock music from the praise band. That gets people in the mood. As time goes on the selected songs grow increasingly intense. They're louder, faster, the pulse of the back beat gets people moving. Before long folks begin to hold their hands up in the air and sway back and forth. It's a group thing. Participants can feel the shared energy in the room. They're all singing about how they love the Lord and how much want to serve him. They'll even contort their faces in intensity as if they were lifting heavy loads. Then folks are crying or shouting or cheering and otherwise emoting all over the place. Then when everyone's really wound up, the music stops and there's a motivational message from the pastor. That's followed by a couple of emotionally charged testimonies from people who were sinners and losers and addicts and deadbeats; but they're all better now that they've come to Jesus. "Oh, thank you, thank you Jeezus!" Then some more really powerful praise music, which then slowly tapers off into something decidedly gentler and more reflective. It brings on what they call the feeling of afterglow. And when it's all over, the people who got into it say, "Wow. I could really feel the Spirit's presence in there today. *That* was worship in the spirit."

Uh-huh ... In response to all that I have related thus far about the common conception of spiritual worship, there is only one word to say; however, it would be inappropriate for me to say it from the pulpit. But to give you the idea, it's what you'd step in if you decided to walk blindfolded through a feed lot. And don't get me wrong: there's nothing wrong with emotions and feelings. It's good to feel sad over your losses, guilt over your sin, relief and thankfulness for having received God's forgiveness, and awe in his holy presence. All these feelings and more are good things – it's just that they have nothing to do with worshipping the Father in spirit.

How do I know? It's because St. Paul describes what true spiritual worship is in today's Epistle lesson, and it's none of that stuff. What is? Well, let's take a look at what Paul says. It's helpful to know that this week's Epistle picks up right where last week's left off. And to refresh your memory (or to inform you if you weren't here) Paul was explaining the mysterious way in which God operates to make known his love in Christ both to Jews and Gentiles alike. Remember that in ancient times, there was a tremendous advantage to being a Jew. They were the only ones with God's Word and Promises. But in Paul's day the Word and Promises of God in Christ were going out into the entire world. And it seemed to some that the situation was

now reversed: that the Gentile nations were in God's favor and the Jews, who were largely rejecting the truth of Christ, were out. That wasn't the case, Paul explained. It's rather that human sin is the great leveler. It puts us all in the same place: all stand condemned before God. But, he goes on, God has placed everyone under sin's bondage precisely in order that he might have mercy on all. So the door of church and the way of salvation through faith in Jesus is open to everyone.

That's the note on which last week's reading ends. And now, in view of what the Lord has done, at the beginning of today's Epistle, Paul breaks forth with a hymn of wonder and praise: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ... for from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." And what Paul is doing here is simply marveling over the wondrous gifts we've given by God in Christ. It's all about Jesus and the gracious gifts that have been heaped upon us through him.

And then Paul shifts gears. He continues, in view of all this, in view of all that Christ has done, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God (that is, these mercies you have received in Christ), to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, *which is your spiritual worship.*"

Did you catch that? You *spiritual* worship is the living sacrifice of your *body*. Think about that: spiritual worship isn't something internal or esoteric or mystical. It's not about what you feel. It pertains to your *body*. And that's not what we expect because, we think, spirit is the opposite of the fleshly and physical. But that's not right. Spiritual worship is hands on. It's very concrete. It's what you do with your body. It's what you do with your life, your family, your neighbor, your work, your time, your resources, your skills, your recreation ...

The idea is this: the sacrifice of Christ is complete. He gave up his body unto death for your *life*. He died for your sin so that you can *live*. Now your spiritual act of worship is giving up your body not to death (there's no need for that), but set aside *alive* for the Lord's purposes, to work his will. So let me make this as clear as I can: Your spiritual worship of the Father is not what you do in here when we gather on Sundays. Strictly speaking, what we do in here isn't worship at all – although we often erroneously call it that (and I'm as guilty as anyone). But no, worship implies that we are doing something for the Lord – giving him our honor and praise and so on. And it's fitting that we do that; but that isn't why we come here. We call our gatherings "Divine Service". The idea is that here God serves us. We come here to receive from the Father, for this is where he gives us his grace and his forgiveness. This is where the Father gives us Jesus, his Son, and his life, his body, his blood, his Spirit in order to equip us to worship the Father with what we do with our bodies out there in the world the rest of the week.

This equipping is accomplished in two ways. First there is what Paul calls "being transformed by the renewal of your mind". It's like we need to be reprogrammed. Born in sin into a sinful world, we naturally think like the sinful world does. And so we think that this life is all about struggling to get by and get ahead. Consequently, it's everyone for himself, competing for highest honors, fighting to get to the top, and pursuing honor, power, wealth, prestige and everything else we call the good things in life. This sort of mindset, we learn from Christ, is exactly our problem. It's the self-preoccupation and self-centeredness of sin. It's what we need to repent and be forgiven of precisely so that we can receive from the Spirit the mind of Christ – Christ who though he is God and worthy of all honor, glory, and worship yet for our sakes made himself nothing, the lowest of servants, taking upon himself the guilt and shame of our sin to serve us in abject humility and suffering. This is the renewal of the mind we need: to think like Jesus, and to follow his example by giving up ourselves to the love and service of others.

That's the first part of our equipping: the transformation of our minds that takes place as we hear and receive the Word of God. The second part of our equipping is the gifts we receive from the Spirit that he gives expressly to be put to use in the service of others. And here Paul uses the familiar metaphor of the body. We are called together to serve one another in the body of Christ. And just as a body has many parts that all serve different functions – each equipped by God to do its part for the whole – so also in the body of Christ the Spirit grants gifts to the individual members that serve the whole. The eyes do not see for themselves alone; they see for the whole body and keep you from walking into walls and stumbling over things. The mouth doesn't eat just for itself; through it the whole body is fed and nourished. So it is in the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit gives to each one gifts, talents, and abilities for the benefit of the whole.

Paul enumerates what some of these gifts are: prophecy, for instance, which is the ability to proclaim God's Word; service, which could be just about talent or ability that could benefit someone else; teaching, primarily in this context the ability to explain God's Word, but in a larger sense the ability to teach any useful subject; exhortation, the ability to inspire and encourage others by word and example; contributing (there's one we don't usually think of as a gift), but the fact is that some are given by the Spirit a special measure of faith that understands that it's impossible to out-give the Lord. They give fearlessly and sacrificially knowing that the Lord will provide for their needs. Paul also mentions the gifts of leadership, so necessary for organizing and coordinating the efforts of individuals within the church; and also acts of mercy, the ability to respond in kindness and compassion to those in need.

When we do these things, when we utilize the Spirit's gifts to aid and assist each other, we are worshipping the Father in spirit. So again, I want to emphasize this. We usually think that we spend an hour or so here worshipping the Lord and the rest of the week going about our business. That's not right. What we do in here on Sundays is, through repentance and Christ's forgiveness, to have our minds renewed by the Word to think like Christ does, and to receive the gifts of his Spirit by which enable us to worship the Father in spirit by what we do with our bodies the rest of the week. In Christ, your whole life becomes spiritual worship; every deed performed in faith in Christ and love for others a sacrifice holy and acceptable to the Lord. And this – what we do here – is the spiritual gas station, so to speak, where you fill up the tank which enables you to worship the Father through faith in Christ.

And hopefully what's been said today transforms your way of thinking. When you go about your tasks this week and those which follow, be conscious that what you are doing in your interaction with others, in your work, and even in your play—that's spiritual worship if it's done in Christian faith. This last week in particular, after the storm that destroyed so much property, as people were helping neighbors, cleaning up debris, patching roofs and windows, comforting one another, reminding each other to count their blessings instead of their losses – all of that was worship in the spirit well pleasing to your Father in heaven.

May God in his mercy give us to see our whole lives this way, and equip us with his gifts that, with the mind of Christ, the spiritual worship we offer him through the living sacrifice of our bodies, may always be holy and acceptable to him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!