

John's Gospel - the Spirit of True Worship

by John Vissers

Jesus teaches the woman at the well that true worship is not about a place, but about the God we worship, and that we must worship God in spirit and truth.

Duration: 39:27

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 4:19-26

Topics: "Worship"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well in John chapter 4. The passage begins with Jesus discussing the topic of worship with the woman. The speaker emphasizes the importance of true worship and how it is often misunderstood in today's society. He shares a story about a family visiting a church and their young child's curiosity about the stained glass windows, which leads to a misunderstanding about the purpose of worship. The speaker highlights the need for believers to understand and engage in genuine worship.

Transcript

I invite you to turn to our lesson for this evening. We're back in John's Gospel, chapter 4. And tonight I'd like to read from verse 19 through to 26 of chapter 4. Verses 19 to 26 of John chapter 4, which is really the last part of the account of the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well. Two weeks ago we looked at the first part of this conversation, the first part of this encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well.

And tonight we want to look at the last part of that conversation in which Jesus says some things to her concerning worship. So let us hear the word of God. Sir, the woman said, I can see that you are a prophet.

Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem. Jesus declared, believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know.

We worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.

The woman said, I know that Messiah, called Christ, is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us. Then Jesus declared, I who speak to you am he.

Amen. May God bless to us this reading from his word tonight. Let's pray together, shall we? Lord, we thank you for this day that we've had together already, the privilege of worshiping you, of praising your name, of gathering together in fellowship, and now we ask that as we consider your word this evening that you would speak to us.

Speak to us concerning what it means to worship you. Give us a fresh vision of what it means to really enter into the experience of worship as your people. So guide us, we pray at this time in Christ's name.

Amen. One of my favorite stories is a story I think that some of you have heard me tell before. It's a story about a family that attended a worship service one Sunday morning in an unfamiliar large urban downtown church in a city where they were visiting.

And the six-year-old member of this family, who was full of life and full of curiosity, wanted to know the significance of the stained glass windows which he saw all around the building, the windows that had been placed throughout the church's memorials. And so as he asked this question, one of his parents responded, Well, son, those are memorials to all the people who died in the service. You know what's coming.

To which he responded, of course, rather innocently, which service, the morning or the evening. Well, sometimes I suppose many of us feel that way about services of worship. They may sometimes appear or feel to us to be boring.

But indeed, worship is central to the life of the Church of Jesus Christ. And we believe that worship, the worship life of a congregation, is vitally important. We are created to worship God.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, the Shorter Catechism, reminds us that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. That's why we have been created, to glorify God, our chief end, our chief purpose in life. The recent Canadian Presbyterian Statement of Christian Belief, Living Faith, says this about worship, The Church lives to praise God.

We have no higher calling than to offer the worship that belongs to God day by day and Sunday by Sunday. In preparing for the message this evening, I was looking at James Boyce's commentary on the Gospel of John, and he says this about this passage by way of introduction. He says, The noted Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said, Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life.

Boyce goes on to say, These words undoubtedly find an echo in the hearts of all true believers, regardless of their opinion of Barth's theology. But he says, In spite of the obvious truth that the worship of God is an important and even urgent imperative for Christians, it is a sad fact that in our day much that passes for worship is not worship at all, and many who sincerely desire to worship do not always know how to go about it or where to begin. One of my favorite writers whom I've much quoted from this pulpit already is A.W. Tozer.

Tozer calls worship the missing jewel of the Church in one of his books. The missing jewel of the Church. So as we come to this passage tonight, we're asking, What is true worship? What does it mean to worship God in spirit and in truth? How can we enter into a vital, meaningful, real, God-glorifying experience of

worship? How ought we to worship? When do we worship? Where can we worship? These are critically important questions, especially at a time when many churches are being torn apart by what are being described as worship wars.

Churches being divided and split apart over styles of worship and forms of worship. These are important questions for us to wrestle with, and these are the questions, it seems to me, which Jesus comes to in the passage which is before us this evening. Jesus teaches the woman at the well about worship.

Now let's be reminded as we think into this passage just what's going on here, but as we do, let's focus on verse 24 where Jesus says to her, God is spirit and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. We want to keep that text before us as we think through this passage together. What does it mean to worship God in spirit? And what does it mean to worship God in truth? Now as we saw a few weeks ago, Jesus met this woman at Jacob's well in the town of Sychar in Samaria.

You'll remember that Jesus and his disciples had decided to travel through Samaria because they were in a hurry and they were making haste to get back home. Jesus was tired from his journey and he was sitting beside this historic well. You remember that the disciples had left him there and they had gone into town to buy some food for lunch.

It was about the sixth hour or about midday, about noon. And as Jesus waited by the well, a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus was thirsty and he asks her for a drink of water.

And the woman of course is astonished that Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, would speak to her, a Samaritan woman, but Jesus tells her that if she really knew with whom she was speaking, she would ask him for living water. And you'll remember how this aroused her curiosity. She assumes that Jesus is talking about some form of running water or living water, a fresh supply of running water that might make her life easier so that she won't have to make the 45-minute trek down to the well every day to carry this water back to her house.

But Jesus tells her about a spring of living water which can give satisfaction. The woman asks how she can obtain this water and then you'll remember the conversation turns slightly in a different direction. It turns into something of a confrontation.

Jesus has broken down racial barriers, ethnic barriers, religious barriers, gender barriers. Jesus has invited this woman to receive the gift of salvation but now the truth of her life has to be faced. And he gets into a delicate area of her life.

Jesus says go and call your husband and come back. I have no husband, she replies. You are right, Jesus says, you've had five husbands and the man you're presently living with is not even your husband.

And suddenly, and I want you to feel the emotion here and the tension in this conversation, suddenly now she's trapped. What had started out as an interesting conversation, what had started out as a kind of intriguing conversation with this Jewish rabbi, this friendly and promising conversation with a stranger has now turned back in on her. It has made her vulnerable and she has to respond in some way.

What will she say? Well, slowly, somewhat startled by what Jesus has said, she mutters a response. She musters up the courage to say, sir, I see that you are a prophet. She realizes that Jesus must have some kind of prophetic insight to be able to say this about her, to look into her life, to understand her life without even knowing her.

And then gaining strength in her voice, she's discovered a way forward. And so she tries to redirect the conversation away from her own life, away from the focus upon her. And so she says, tell me, there's always something I've wanted to ask a prophet.

How is it that we Samaritans worship God on this mountain, but you Jews worship in Jerusalem? It's a diversionary tactic, it seems, on her part, an attempt to get out from underneath the heat of Jesus' interrogation or Jesus looking into her life. But in response to what appears to be a diversionary tactic on the part of the woman, Jesus teaches her about what it means to be a real believer, about what it means to be a real worshiper of God. And as we see, he reveals in a very poignant and powerful moment, in a transforming moment, he reveals his identity to her at the end of this conversation.

And so this woman has encountered the Messiah and she's been forced to confront the reality of her own life. She's been invited to drink the living water offered by Jesus, and now she's being invited to become a real and a true worshiper of the living God. And it's in the context of that conversation, it's in the context of this response by Jesus to this woman that we have this tremendous teaching about what it means to be a real worshiper of God.

And Jesus removes, as it were, at least tries to remove for her the hindrances to entering into the true spirit of worship, hindrances that we all need to be reminded of. Now the first thing that I want us to take away from this text by way of application, by way of understanding the themes which emerge here, is that we all need to understand, it seems to me, our need for worship. You see, Jesus teaches the woman at the well about the meaning of true worship in the midst of her life.

Jesus allows himself to be diverted into this discussion because he sees it as a fruitful means of further teaching this woman and persuading her concerning his claim upon her life. He wants her to understand that she can become a true worshiper of God, even though she is a Samaritan, even though her life is in pieces, even though her relationships are in a mess, she can become a true worshiper of God. She assumes, of course, that her question is going to provide a religious diversion away from her life, but in fact Jesus shows her that this question has everything to do with who she is, everything to do with what she's about, everything to do with her life.

And I want us to realize, and I want us to think about that, because we sometimes think about worship as a one-hour spiritual interlude into a week of worldly reality. We tend to compartmentalize worship, to give it one small place in our life, to put it in one little part of our lives, but in the Bible worship has to do with real life. In this passage, and I find this rather astonishing, this teaching of Jesus comes in the midst of a passage which is dealing with adultery, which is dealing with ethnic and religious conflict, with religious tension.

It's astonishing to me that we find this profound teaching of Jesus concerning worship in this conversation with this woman at the well. If you are going to go to the New Testament and find a place where you might indeed find the teaching of Jesus concerning worship, the first place you might go is in his conversations with the religious leaders. You might think that there you would find some teaching concerning worship as Jesus is in a religious place, perhaps in the temple, speaking with the religious leaders.

But no, here you have the height, really, of spiritual teaching concerning worship on the street. Jesus conversing with this woman. And it seems to me that one of the things we need to understand is that worship has to do with real life, that it has to do with the very fabric of our lives.

And one of the reasons worship is so important to our lives is because it has to do with the reality of who God has created us to be. It has to do with real life, with our work, with our families, with our friendships, with our failures, with our problems, with our pressures, with our struggles, with our sin, with the crises that we face day by day. You see, worship is not intended to be an experience which is to draw us out of the world, as it were, for a spiritual turbo charge, which is intended simply to make us feel better.

But worship is our calling in the midst of life. And Jesus calls this woman and he invites this woman in the midst of her pain, in the midst of her real struggles, to enter into the experience of the worship of God. We have been created to worship God and our lives are restless until we find our rest in the praise and worship of God.

Jesus knew this about the woman at the well and he knows it about our lives also. When we forsake the worship of God, we try to fill our lives with all kinds of other things that leave us in the end unfulfilled. Worldly water that will never quench our spiritual thirst, material possessions, fleeting relationships, all kinds of other things.

You see, the reality is that we have been created to be worshiping creatures and if we do not worship the true and living God, we will fill our lives with all kinds of other things in order to try to fill that need, that void within our lives. When I was a teenager, I worked for a few summers on my uncle's farm and one of my jobs was to run the irrigation system. This was before we had more sophisticated equipment and a crew of us would be charged with the responsibility of every hour or every 45 minutes, depending on the schedule, of moving the pipe from one field to the next field and then hooking it back up to the pump and setting the pump in motion and again seeing that the water was there so that the fields would be irrigated, that they received the proper amounts of water so that the vegetables would grow.

One of the problems, and it was a real difficult and annoying problem, is that sometimes pieces of dirt or pieces of grass or pieces of straw would get into the pipes and would partially block the nozzle. These things worked in such a way so that the pressure of the water forced up the pipe, of course caused the nozzle to go around in a circle so that the water was spread evenly all around the field. But what would happen is when a piece of dirt or or straw or grass got caught in the nozzle, as the pressure of the water built up, rather than spinning around and spreading the water evenly, the nozzle would get stuck in one place.

And so I go back to the field and what you would find, of course, is one section of the field completely flooded out and destroyed. I mean there was no way that anything was going to grow there and the rest of the field, of course, remained parched dry. And so the irrigation system broke down, in a sense, and it didn't do its job.

One whole area of the field got flooded out, destroying the crop, while other parts remained absolutely dry, longing for water. And it seems to me that that's often how it is in our lives. We have been created in the image of God to worship God, and our need to worship God is like this pressure which builds up within us, a well of water which builds up inside of us, and when we block that worship, the pressure is released in other directions, in inappropriate and in distorted ways.

So what happens is we end up drowning in one part of our lives and end up parched in other parts of our lives. You see, the true worship of God is vital to who we are. It is integral to whom we have created to be by God, and without it, we wither and we perish like leaves on the tree.

It was so for the woman at the well, and it's so for you, and it's so for me. But secondly, let's notice that Jesus challenges the perceptions and the priorities of the woman at the well and tries to move her past her misunderstandings. The woman asked Jesus about the location of worship.

What was, where was the proper place to worship God? Was it on this mountain in Samaria, as the Samaritans believed, or was it in Jerusalem, as the Jews believed? Now you need to understand that Jews and Samaritans were locked in a conflict, a sometimes bitter conflict over where worship should take place, over where was the right place, the true place, the only place to worship God. And the Samaritans had invested themselves in the first five books of the Old Testament, in the Pentateuch, in the first five books of the Bible. And on the basis of Deuteronomy, a passage in Deuteronomy, they believed that Mount Gerizim was the proper place to worship God, and that no other place was appropriate.

The Jews, on the other hand, gave priority to the Lord's promise to David, that a temple would be built in Jerusalem, and that the mountain in Jerusalem, the temple in Jerusalem would be the proper place of the worship of God. Notice what Jesus says. In the end, he ends up offending both Jews and Samaritans in his response, for he says, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

You see, what Jesus is trying to do is to redirect her focus. The important thing about worship is not where you worship. The important thing about worship is the God that you worship.

True worship does not have to do finely with a place, but it has to do with the object of your worship. And Jesus makes this point rather strongly. At first, it appears he's taken the side of the Jewish people, the God whose saving purposes are revealed throughout the scriptures of the Old Testament is the object of true worship.

He says, you Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Jesus is pointing out that the God revealed in the scriptures of the Old Testament, the God revealed progressively throughout the history of Israel, is the God to be worshiped.

Salvation is from the Jews in that sense. But then he pushes further, and he reminds the woman at the well that the issue is not the place. And even the Jewish leaders get stuck here with their focus on Jerusalem.

Because the true God, if you really understand this God revealed throughout the scriptures of the Old Testament, if you really understand the God revealed in the first five books of the Old Testament, if you really understand the God revealed to David, if you really understand the God revealed throughout the scriptures, then you will know that this God is not contained or localized in one place, but that God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship him in spirit. What does it mean to say that God is spirit? It is to say, of course, that God cannot be contained, that God is not material or physical, but God is infinite, eternal spirit, that God cannot be confined or limited to one location, but that God is free, and God is majestic, and God is holy, and God is transcendent, and this is the God whom this woman is invited to worship. But Jesus also says this God is personal because he calls God Father.

True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. And so to worship God in this way is to focus on who God is, to have a right understanding of who God is as infinite, eternal, spirit, majestic, and transcendent, yet at the same time a personal God whom we can really know and enter into a relationship with. And that's the genius of the God revealed in scripture, in his majesty, in his holiness, in his glory, and

yet in a personal and real and intimate way.

The tragedy is, of course, that we often get stuck in our own misunderstandings about worship. We get preoccupied with a building as beautiful and as important as a building may be for worship, the place of worship. We make that the focus of our worship, but what makes a building such as this important is not the building itself, but that here God in his grace meets with his people as his word is preached and as they gather in the name of Jesus.

There are all kinds of things we can focus on in worship. Today there's a lot of talk about the forms of worship or the type of music or whether there should be involvement of both lay people and pastors together in leading worship. And if you look at the worship wars that are going on in many congregations today, I want to suggest to you that they look strangely similar to the dispute between Jews and Samaritans in the first century, because they focus on the things that ultimately are not the point, and we fail to focus on the real issue, the object of our worship.

Jesus wants to push the woman at the well past those truncated visions of what worship is into a real understanding of what true worship is all about. And then he tries to move her into true worship. Jesus tells the woman at the well that God seeks worshippers who worship in spirit and in truth.

What does it mean to worship God in truth? Well, let me suggest two very practical things here. First of all, it means to worship God truthfully. It means to enter into his presence truthfully, honestly, wholeheartedly, to stand in truth before God, not trying to hide from God, not trying to pretend that you're something that you're not.

It means to have a right understanding of who you are before God as you stand in God's presence, to enter in truthfully in the sense of understanding who you are. And of course, it also means to worship God on the basis of the truth of biblical revelation, to worship the true God revealed to us in scripture, not a figment of our own imaginations. We're not free to say or to think whatever we want about God, and that's the danger of the culture in which we're living today.

People want to make up all kinds of things about God, their own images of God, use their own language, express their own feelings about God. But the reality is that what it means to worship God as a Christian, as a true believer, is to have that worship formed, shaped, and to be conformed to the revelation of God in his holy word. We're not free to simply worship a God of our own imagination.

A. W. Tozer, in his wonderful little book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, starts out by saying that what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. And then he goes on to say, a right conception of God is basic not only to theology, but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple.

Where it is inadequate or out of plumb, the whole structure must sooner or later collapse. I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God. Among the sins, he says, to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on his character.

The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than he is, in itself a monstrous sin and substitutes for the true God one made after its own likeness. Always this God will conform to the image of the one who created it and will be base or pure, cruel or kind, according to the moral state of the mind from which it

emerges. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of him.

If you've never read this book, I would encourage you to read this book. This is one of those books that changed my life when I first became a Christian because it speaks so poignantly about what it means to have a right knowledge of God, a right understanding of who God is, and that's what it means to worship God in truth. To worship God in spirit is to acknowledge that God is spirit.

It means that we do not worship an idol, a God tied down to one place, but it means more than that. It also means that we worship in spirit as God, by his spirit, touches our spirits. Philippians 3, verse 3, Philippians chapter 3, verse 3, Paul says this, he says, for it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the spirit of God, who glory in Christ, and who put no confidence in the flesh.

You see, the reality is that we enter into true worship, not simply on our own strength, not simply on our own power, but as God, by his grace, by his Holy Spirit, fills our hearts, fills our lives, touches our spirits, so that our spirits can be lifted and enter into the worship of the living God. Left on our own, we create idols. We make and approach things all wrong.

We worship in the flesh. But Paul says, when we are touched by the spirit of God, when we are regenerated by the spirit of God, when we are given a new nature by the spirit of God, that new nature, that new experience, enables us to enter into the true worship of God. When we receive the living water that Jesus offers to this woman at the well, we enter into true worship.

And then finally notice, in a beautiful way, this passage concludes by the woman at the well encountering the Messiah. In response to all this teaching, in response to Jesus' answer to her question, she says to Jesus, I know that Messiah is coming, and when he comes he will explain everything to us. Now you need to understand that the Samaritans had a very specific understanding of who the Messiah was going to be.

They believed that the Messiah, based again on the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of Moses, they believed that the Messiah was going to be a second Moses, that he would come and that he would teach, that he would explain everything, the Messiah would reveal the truth, would restore belief to the people, would renew true worship as it was set out in the books of the law. And Jesus declares to her, I who speak to you am he. One can only imagine what was going on in her heart and what was going on in her mind and what was going on in her life at that moment when here she was being confronted with the Messiah.

Jesus says, I am he. I am the one who has come from heaven to teach, to reveal, to uncover all this, to restore belief, to renew true worship. But of course, there's so much more because even this woman's expectation of the Messiah, just as her understanding of worship, her expectation of the Messiah was truncated.

It was a smaller vision, a smaller version of who the Messiah really was going to be because this Messiah not only was going to teach great things, not only was going to reveal the law of God in a new way, but this one with whom she is having this conversation has invited her to drink from the well that will never run dry, has offered her salvation, has offered her redemption, has offered her her very life back. And although she may not fully understand it, she is now meeting the one in whom God himself is present and God is able through Christ to transform her life in a way like it's never been touched before. You see, true worship is not the result of more information.

It's not the result of an enlightened mind. It is the result of a changed heart. And this woman at the well encounters Jesus and she's never the same again.

And if we want to enter into true worship, if we want to enter into an experience of worship which not only makes us feel good, because that's not ultimately what worship is about. Worship is about bringing glory and honor to God. But if we want to enter in to an experience of worship that has any meaning for us, that has any reality to our lives, that touches us where we live and puts us in touch with the living God, then we don't go looking for it in religious places, in shrines and in buildings.

That's the religious temptation. And we don't go looking for it within ourselves to dig deep down within us. That's the secular temptation to turn inside the new age subjectivism.

But rather we are invited with this woman to look to Christ. Because here and in him alone do we find the one where we can meet God and where God meets us. Here we find in him the basis of true worship.

In him God has tabernacled with us. God has pitched his tent in our midst in Jesus. The word became flesh and dwelt for a while among us.

And worship for the Christian begins, and worship ends, and worship is centered, and worship has everything to do with Jesus. The Jesus who enables us to enter in to the presence of his Father. The Jesus whose spirit enables us to enter into true worship.

And so I say to you, I invite you tonight, do you know the Messiah? The one who is called Christ? The one who stands and speaks to this woman. I who speak to you am he. For if you know him, if you know him, then you begin to understand, to experience the spirit of true worship.

Let's pray together. Lord, we confess that so much that passes in our churches, in our lives for worship, falls so far short of your will, of what you teach us in scripture. Tonight we pray that you would renew within us the spirit of true worship individually and also as a congregation.

And Lord, help us, we pray, to be encountered in a fresh way by the one who is the Messiah, even Jesus our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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