

## ***'Being the Church' - Part 5***

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The Apostle John tells us in the book Revelation about a series of visions he was given. He saw into heaven's throne room, and witnessed the glory of God seated on His throne. He saw Jesus, appearing at times as a Lamb slain for God's people, and at other times as a great Conqueror, waging war and riding upon a white horse followed by the armies of heaven. He saw strange images of beasts and dragons, bowls and trumpets, all signifying and symbolizing the gargantuan struggle taking place between the forces of God and the forces of Satan. He saw the end of earth's history, when Satan is defeated and vanquished for all time, and he witnessed the new heavens and earth where God's people will live in happiness forever.

And when John was shown this final scene of God's ultimate triumph and the joy of God's people, he was so overcome by emotion that he fell down to worship the angel who had been showing him all these things. But the angel said, *"Don't do it! I am a fellow servant with you. Worship God!"* (Rev 22:9)

If we were to summarize the teaching of the Bible in just a few sentences, one of them would have to be this two-word sentence spoken by the angel to John: *Worship God!* The Bible presents God as the One Who is worthy of worship, and repeatedly calls us to give Him our worship and place Him at the centre of everything.

Today we continue with this series of teaching which attempts to define the type of church God wants us to be. In our last message we saw that the Bible identifies five characteristics of the New Testament Church which God wants every church to possess: worship, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and evangelism. Today we're going to discuss what is involved in the first of these, worship.

In John 4:19-24 we read where Jesus was talking with a woman from Samaria, and the woman asked Jesus to settle an argument about where people should worship. Instead, Jesus talked about the type of worship that pleases God.

Look at John 4:19-24 with me:

*"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." (John 4:19-24, NIV).*

So let me share some truths about worship with you this morning.

First, and foundational, notice that Jesus says that it's not just a God that we are worshiping - it's our heavenly Father.

'Father' was the preferred name that Jesus used when talking about God. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount He said things such as, *"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven"* (Matt 5:16; NIV) and he told us that *"your Father knows what you need before you ask him."* (Matt 6:8, NIV), and promised that *"your Father in heaven will give good gifts to those who ask him"* (Matt 7:11, NIV). He taught us to pray by saying, *"Our Father who art in heaven"* (Matt 6:9, King James Version) and promised that, *"your heavenly Father will also forgive you"* (Matt 6:14, NIV).

There are many other examples, but these suffice to show that Jesus tended to call God 'Father' when he was speaking about Him. And here, when speaking with this Samaritan woman, Jesus used this 'father' language to talk about God. *"A time is coming when you will worship THE FATHER neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... the true worshipers will worship THE FATHER in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers THE FATHER seeks."*

Now, at first glance this may not seem like such a big deal, especially to those of us who have been in the Church for a while, because we've grown so accustomed to hearing it. However, calling God 'Father' in Jesus' time was a really big deal. It was even somewhat scandalous, because it implied a closeness and familiarity with God that the teachers of the law said was way beyond our ability to experience. They suggested we are temporal but God is eternal. We are weak but God is all-powerful. We are limited but God has no limits. So the very idea that we could have a close relationship with God as our Father was totally outrageous to them and yet here was Jesus, teaching us to call God 'Father.' There is a lot of meaning packed into that word.

God is more to us than some all-powerful distant being. He is more than some eternal spirit. He is more than some all-knowing entity. He is more than the creator and king of the universe. If that was all we could say God was, there would still be plenty of reason to worship Him. He would still deserve our worship, and we would still have reason to give it. But God is far more than that!

Not only is He an all-powerful God who created us, He is our Father who loves us and cares for us. Not only is He an all-knowing entity who knows us totally, everything about us, even our thoughts, He is our Father who loves us anyway, in spite of what He knows about us. Not only is He the king of the universe, He is our Father who protects us and provides for us and fixes things when they break. And so the reality of who God is, changes our motivation for worship. It's not just that we worship a king because He requires us to, we worship our Father who loves us and cares for us. It's not just that we worship an all-powerful being who could force us to, we freely worship our Father who loves and protects us. It's not just a god we're worshiping. It's our Father, with all that word entails.

When we reflect on that - on Who it is we are worshiping - it changes our view of worship from an activity that we *have to* do because God desires it, to something we *get to* do because God loves us and we want to thank Him and honour Him and praise Him.

This leads us to another truth about worship that comes from this passage in John's gospel. It's not the 'dressings of worship' that are important; it's the heart of the worshiper that really matters. The woman in our passage mentions a debate between the Jews and the Samaritans that had been going on for hundreds of years and that debate centered around the question of where was the proper place to worship God. The Jews said that the proper place for worship was the Temple in Jerusalem, while the Samaritans taught that God wanted to be worshiped on top of Mount Gerizim, a mountain of Samaria. They were both hung up on what we might call the 'dressings' of worship - the external, outward signs of worship that we tend to think must be present in order for worship to occur: things like church buildings and singing songs and preaching sermons and all those other up-front things we value.

Now, these things are good, don't get me wrong. But they aren't what make worship, worship. In fact, you can have all these things and still not have worship. Conversely, you can have none of those things and still have worship. The Jews and Samaritans were hung up on the externals of worship and Jesus said they both were wrong. He said, *"a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."* And Jesus was right. Within just a short period of time, Roman armies would put an end to the formal worship of God in both places.

Jesus said that true worshipers would worship the Father *"in spirit and in truth."* This phrase means *"worshiping God in sincerity and honesty, led by the Spirit of God."* It is to humbly come before Him, drawn by His Spirit, and offer Him our praise and adoration for Who He is and all He has done, and recognize our dependence upon Him for our salvation, for our life and for everything!

It is the Spirit of God Himself Who draws us into this place of transparency and honesty before God. We cannot worship God in spirit until our spirit has been overwhelmed or captured by His Spirit. *That* is where *true* worship comes from within us.

God is not interested in lip-service worship, even if it's done in a church building. He doesn't want us to sing songs or pray prayers while our minds are on other things. He doesn't want us to take communion when our thoughts aren't centered on Jesus and the power and reality of His atoning death. God isn't interested in us sitting politely while a preacher preaches, when our mind is miles away and we are not engaging with the life-changing Word of God.

By the same token, this means that you can worship God, even when you are not in a church building. It means that you can worship God, even if your singing voice isn't all that great. It means that you can worship God, whether you are with other people or by yourself. Because our worship is not confined to a place. We can - in fact, we should - worship God every day.

You see, we worship God anytime we pause to reflect on how wonderful He is, and offer Him our praise. Every time we sing a song praising God and really mean it - whether in a church building or in the shower - we are worshipping. Every time we thank God for how amazing He is to us, we are worshipping. Every time we read the Scriptures and draw near to Him with hearts open to hear what He has to say, we are worshipping Him because we are saying to Him that He is important enough to draw near to, listen to, seek wisdom from and follow every day of our lives.

Worship is not a Sunday morning activity only, any more than it was a Jerusalem Temple or Mount Gerizim activity only. Worship is about honoring God with our lives by praising Him for how good and wonderful He is. And worship should take place every day, because God is worthy of our worship every day! When we save worship for Sunday; when we make worship something that can only occur within the walls of a building - we are falling into the same trap which snared the Samaritans and the Jews. And Jesus says, *"Don't be like that! God is seeking you to worship Him in spirit and in truth."*

Worship is not tied to a building. Worship is not tied to an event. Rather, worship is tied to a thankful and sincere attitude of praise and thanksgiving that acknowledges God's greatness, majesty, grace, love, mercy and His central place in our lives.

So when we see the early Church in action in Acts chapter 2, we see a people who worshiped God every day - who placed God and His mission at the centre of everything. And herein lies the most important reality concerning worship and if you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember this: to truly worship God, we must place Him at the centre of everything, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

In John chapter 5 we read where Jesus said that He only did what He saw the Father doing and only spoke the words the Father gave Him to speak. What did that mean? Quite simply it meant that Jesus intentionally placed the Father at the centre of His life – everything was about His will, His glory, His mission, His purpose, His plan, His ministry, His desires, His Kingdom.

When Jesus did this He modeled true worship for us. True worship, at its best, looks just like that. When only doing what you see God doing and only speaking the words God gives you to speak becomes your daily priority, your goal, your purpose and your very life, then, and only then, will you truly understand and experience the fullness of worship. Then you will wake up every morning and immediately think of God first. You will thank Him for gifting you another new day. Then you will immediately start asking two questions and you won't stop asking them until your head hits the pillow that night. *“What are You doing, Lord?”* and *“How can I be part of it?”*

When you open the Scriptures for your quiet time; when you switch on the news or read the morning paper; when you go for your morning walk around your neighbourhood: *“What are You doing, Lord? ... How can I be part of it?”* When you enter this building each Sunday for community worship, you will know that the only thing on your mind and in your heart will be discovering what God is doing in the midst of His gathered people, what He is saying to His disciples and how you can respond.

That is all that matters and this is worship. I don't care if you think the sermons are too long or too short; the music too old or new, too fast or slow. None of that matters to God. The only thing that matters is your attitude and your desire to truly encounter God – to see what He is doing and hear what He is saying and be an active part of His mission on earth.

If you leave this place without encountering God and His kingdom and without hearing Him speak directly to you – you are the only one to blame – not God, not the musicians, song leaders or the preacher. You won't see if you're not looking; you won't hear if you're not listening; you won't be engaged if you're not prepared to change and grow and move out of your comfort zone.

For Jesus to say that He only did what He saw the Father doing and only spoke the words the Father gave Him to speak – it meant that His entire demeanor every moment of every day was one of looking and listening for the Father. It doesn't take a high IQ to work out that if you are not looking intently for something, you will most probably never find it and if you are not listening intentionally for someone you will most probably miss what they're saying! And yet I suggest there are millions of people across the world right now who claim to be disciples of Jesus and yet they fail to understand this most basic, defining reality of Jesus' entire life and ministry.

Every step Jesus took, every miracle He performed, every sermon He preached, every prayer He prayed, every decision He made - were all in response to what He first observed His Father doing and saying. This is worship! This is the Christian life! This is the most important lesson Jesus taught us. This is why He remained among us for three years as a man – so we could see how we were meant to live and worship.

*“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”* (Romans 12:1-2)

When Paul says we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice and that *this* is true worship, he is not talking about our physical bodies – he is talking about our entire being. He is talking about us being totally surrendered and then totally transformed so that God is in the centre of everything.

*This is worship. This is Christianity. This is how the kingdom of heaven will advance on this earth as God's will unfolds before our eyes. And all that begins when you open your eyes in the morning and the first thing that comes to mind is, "What are you doing Lord? How can I be part of it?"*

At first you may not have an answer. When we are so out of practice, it takes time to recognize the hand of God at work; it takes time to discern His voice above our own and all the other voices which seek to dominate His. But in time, you *will* see; in time, you *will* hear and you will become part of the mission of Christ to bring every man, woman and young person into the glory of the Kingdom of God. Then, you will know what true worship is. Then you will know why God allows us to continue living in this broken and needy world. Then you will know what *being the Church* truly means!