

Heart of Worship, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: What Is Worship? Spirit and Truth

John 4:19–24

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson sets the foundation for the entire study, because here Jesus himself defines worship. What is doctrinally at stake is the meaning of the phrase “in spirit and in truth.” Worship “in spirit” means worship that springs from the inner person, the heart genuinely engaged with God, not mere outward performance. Worship “in truth” means worship governed by God’s revelation, offered in the way he has authorized, rather than according to human invention, preference, or the impulse of the moment. Jesus holds these two together. Sincerity without truth drifts into worship that pleases us but was never asked of us. Correctness without sincerity hardens into the empty ritual that the prophets condemned. Help your class feel the weight of both halves, and resist the temptation to let them choose only the half that comes naturally to them.

Notice that Jesus also makes a truth claim the modern mind resists. He tells the woman, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (v. 22). Worship is not a sincere reach toward a vague higher power. It is the response of the heart to the God who has actually made himself known, supremely in his Son. This is the positive form of the regulative idea your congregation cherishes. We do not approach God however we please and hope it lands. We come gladly, in the way he has shown us, because we trust that he knows how he is to be approached. Present this not as a list of restrictions but as a glad confidence: the Father has opened the way and shown us how to come.

At the same time, this passage is aimed straight at the heart. Jesus is forming a worshiper, not winning a debate. He meets a broken woman at a well, exposes her real life, and still draws her toward worship. The aim of this lesson is not merely that your students hold the right definition of worship, but that they become the kind of people the Father is seeking, drawing near with sincere and surrendered hearts. As you teach, keep one eye on the doctrine and one eye on the person in the chair who, like the woman, may be hiding a wound behind a religious question.

Question 1

Student Question:

The woman raises the old argument about the right place to worship, this mountain or Jerusalem (vv. 20–21). How does Jesus reframe her question, and what does it tell us that he shifts the issue away from a location and toward the kind of worshiper the Father seeks?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by letting the class feel the move Jesus makes. The woman asks a “where” question, the great Samaritan and Jewish dispute over the proper place of worship. Jesus does not answer on her terms. He announces that an hour is coming, and now is, when the location will no longer be the point at all. The temple in Jerusalem was never the goal; it pointed forward to something greater that arrives in Christ.

The reframing matters because it moves worship from geography to the worshiper. The Father is not seeking a place; he is seeking people of a certain kind. This is good news for a woman who could never claim the right pedigree or the right mountain, and it is good news for us. Access to God is no longer tied to a building, a city, or a priesthood of stone and incense.

Help the class see the continuity with the rest of the New Testament. Under the new covenant the people of God are themselves the temple, and worship ascends from hearts indwelt by the Spirit, gathered anywhere the church meets. The question is never first “where” but “to whom” and “from what kind of heart.”

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True worship under the new covenant is not bound to a physical location or temple (John 4:21).
- The temple and its system pointed forward to Christ and are fulfilled in him.
- The Father seeks worshipers of a particular kind, not a particular place (John 4:23).
- Access to God now rests on Christ, not on geography, priesthood, or ritual site.
- Worship is fundamentally relational, the response of a person to the God who seeks him.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it freeing that worship is no longer tied to one holy place?
- How might we still fall into a “right place, right building” mindset today?
- What does it change to know the Father is seeking us before we ever seek him?

Question 2

Student Question:

Like the woman, we sometimes steer a conversation toward religious debate to avoid a more personal matter God is pressing on. When has your own attention to “where” or “how” of religion become a way of keeping God at a comfortable distance from your actual life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a self-examining question, so aim for honesty rather than guilt. The woman’s pivot to a religious debate is deeply human. When God touches something tender, our instinct is to retreat into safer, more abstract territory, doctrine, tradition, the failures of other groups, anything but the matter at hand.

Invite the class to recognize the pattern in themselves without naming anyone publicly. A person can be very interested in the “how” of worship precisely because it lets them avoid the “who” they are becoming. Religious talk can be a hiding place.

Move the conversation toward hope. Jesus did not shame the woman for hiding; he gently drew her out and offered her living water. The God who exposes our evasions does so in order to heal, not to humiliate. Encourage students that the way out of hiding is to let Jesus name the real thing and meet us there.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The human tendency to use religion as a shield against personal conviction.
- God’s gentleness in exposing what we hide in order to heal it.
- The difference between curiosity about religion and surrender to God.
- Self-examination as a healthy and ordinary part of discipleship.

Discussion Prompts

- When have you noticed yourself changing the subject to “religion” to dodge something personal?
- Why is it safer, in a sense, to argue about worship than to surrender in worship?
- What does Jesus’ tenderness with the woman teach us about how God handles our evasions?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus says, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (v. 24). What does it mean that worship must be “in spirit,” and why can no amount of correct outward activity substitute for the engagement of the heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the word “spirit” in the phrase “in spirit and truth.” Jesus grounds it in the nature of God: “God is spirit” (v. 24). Because God is not a physical idol to be located and managed, he is not worshiped chiefly by external acts but by the engagement of the inner person with him.

Stress that this does not make outward acts unimportant. Singing, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and giving are all bodily, outward acts the New Testament commands. The point is that these acts become worship only when the heart is truly in them. The same prophets who delivered God’s commands also thundered against worship offered with the lips while the heart was far away.

Help students see the danger of mere external correctness. It is entirely possible to do all the right things in the assembly and worship no one, because the spirit is absent. “In spirit” means the real self shows up, engaged, attentive, and surrendered, not just the body in the pew.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God is spirit, and therefore worship must engage the inner person (John 4:24).
- Outward acts of worship are required, but become true worship only when the heart is present.
- The peril of external religion that goes through the motions without the heart.
- The unity of inner devotion and outward obedience in acceptable worship.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between attending worship and actually worshipping?
- How can we tell, honestly, whether our “spirit” is present when we worship?
- Why does God refuse to accept worship that is all body and no heart?

Question 4

Student Question:

Think about your last few times in worship. Where does your mind tend to drift, and what does that drifting reveal about what currently has your heart? Name one specific habit of attention you would need to change to worship more fully “in spirit.”

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the matter of attention. Our minds wander in worship, and where they wander tells the truth about what currently rules our hearts. The grocery list, the conflict at work, the game that afternoon, these are not random; they are what we treasure when our guard is down.

Encourage practical honesty. Ask students to think about the moment the songs begin or the bread is passed. Where does the mind go? This is not about manufacturing intense feelings but about offering God genuine attention.

Offer hope and a concrete handle. Suggest small disciplines: arriving with the heart prepared, praying before the assembly begins, actually thinking about the words being sung, fixing the mind on Christ during the Supper. Worshipping “in spirit” is a skill the Spirit grows in us as we give him our attention on purpose.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The wandering of the mind in worship as a window into the heart’s treasures.
- The call to offer God genuine, undivided attention.

- Spiritual disciplines that prepare the heart to engage in worship.
- Worship as an act of the will, not merely a feeling that happens to us.

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your mind most often drift during worship, and what does that reveal?
- What is one practical habit that would help you arrive with your heart ready?
- How might preparing before Sunday change what happens during the assembly?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus joins “spirit” and “truth” together, not one or the other (vv. 23–24). Why are both necessary, and what goes wrong when worship has sincerity without truth, or correctness without a sincere heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now bring both words together. Jesus does not say “spirit or truth,” as if we could pick the one that suits us. He binds them: “in spirit and truth.” Both are essential, and each protects against the failure of the other.

Sincerity without truth produces worship that is heartfelt but misdirected, shaped by what moves us rather than by what God has revealed. The history of Israel is full of fervent worship God refused, because it was offered in ways he had not authorized or to gods he had not named. Earnestness is not enough; God must be worshiped as he truly is and as he has shown.

Truth without sincerity produces the cold, correct ritual the prophets despised. A congregation can have every outward thing right and still draw near with lips only. Help the class see that the goal is not balance as a compromise, but fullness, the whole heart engaged, gladly offering what God has actually asked for.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship must be both heartfelt (in spirit) and governed by God’s revelation (in truth).
- Sincerity without truth: earnest worship that God has not authorized.
- Truth without sincerity: correct ritual offered with a distant heart.
- God’s revealed will, not human preference, defines acceptable worship.
- The positive regulative idea: we gladly worship in the way God has shown us.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is sincerity, by itself, not enough to make worship acceptable to God?
- Why is doctrinal correctness, by itself, not enough either?
- What does it look like for a congregation to pursue the fullness of both?

Question 6

Student Question:

Which side of “spirit and truth” do you more easily neglect: the warmth and sincerity of the heart, or the careful submission to what God has actually revealed? What would it look like this week to grow in the side you tend to shortchange?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the personal counterpart to question 5. Most of us lean one direction. Some are warm but careless about what God has actually said, ready to worship however feels meaningful. Others are careful and correct but cool, more concerned to be right than to be near.

Help students diagnose themselves without shame. Neither lean is the whole picture, and naming our tendency is the first step toward growth. The warm-hearted student grows by submitting gladly to God’s revealed pattern. The careful student grows by letting the truth he defends actually warm and move him.

Make it concrete. Ask each person to name the side they neglect and one small step toward the other. The aim is not to scold but to round out worshipers who offer God both a full heart and a glad obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-knowledge about whether we tend to neglect sincerity or truth.
- Growth in worship as a movement toward fullness, not a settling for one side.
- Glad submission to God’s pattern as an expression of love, not mere rule-keeping.
- The warming of the heart by the very truths we confess.

Discussion Prompts

- Which do you more easily neglect, the warmth of the heart or careful obedience?
- What is one step toward the side you tend to shortchange?
- How can truth itself become fuel for a warmer heart, rather than a cold checklist?

Question 7

Student Question:

Twice Jesus says the Father is “seeking” such people to worship him (v. 23). What does it tell us about God that he is the one searching for worshipers, and how does that reshape the way we think about why we gather?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw attention to the astonishing word “seeking.” Twice Jesus says the Father seeks such worshipers (v. 23). We usually picture ourselves seeking God. Here God is the seeker, out looking for people who will worship him in spirit and truth.

This reframes the whole motive for worship. We gather not to satisfy a divine ego, and not merely to discharge a duty, but in response to a God who desires us, who took the initiative to make himself known and to open the way. Worship is an answer to a pursuit already underway.

Tie this to the gospel. The same seeking love that sat at the well sent the Son to seek and save the lost. Worship flows from grace; we love because he first loved us, and we worship because he first sought us. Let the class feel the warmth of being wanted by God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God takes the initiative; he seeks worshipers (John 4:23).
- Worship as a response to grace, not a way of earning God's favor.
- The seeking love of God revealed in Christ who came to seek the lost.
- Our gathering as an answer to a pursuit God began.

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change your view of worship to know God is seeking you?
- What is the difference between worshipping to earn favor and worshipping in response to grace?
- Where else in Scripture do you see God as the seeker rather than the sought?

Question 8

Student Question:

If God is actively seeking worshipers, then worship is first his initiative and invitation, not merely your duty. How would approaching worship as a response to a God who is seeking you change the way you walk into the assembly next Sunday?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the truth of God's seeking into a Sunday-morning reality. If the Father is seeking worshipers, then walking into the assembly is walking into a meeting God himself desired and arranged.

Invite students to imagine the difference. The person who comes to “get something over with” carries a very different heart than the person who comes knowing the God of heaven was looking for them. The second arrives expectant, glad, ready to give God their attention.

Offer a concrete practice. Suggest that before the assembly, students remind themselves: the Father is seeking me; I am coming to meet the One who wanted me here. That single thought can transform a familiar hour into a genuine drawing near.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Corporate worship as a meeting God himself desires.
- The posture of expectancy and gladness in approaching the assembly.
- Worship as response to a seeking God shaping our practical preparation.
- The privilege of access purchased by Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- How would you walk into Sunday differently if you truly believed God was seeking you there?
- What habits could help you arrive expectant rather than merely dutiful?
- How can we help one another come ready to worship?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus ties true worship to the truth that “salvation is from the Jews” (v. 22) and to worship governed by truth, not by human preference or invention. Worship “in truth” means worship shaped by what God has revealed, offered the way he has shown, rather than whatever moves us. How does this passage guard us against the idea that worship is simply whatever feels meaningful to us, and how does it also guard us against cold, heartless ritual?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, so give it room. Jesus makes two claims the modern world resists. First, he says the Samaritans “worship what you do not know,” while “we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (v. 22). Worship is not a sincere reach toward an unknown power; it is the response of the heart to the God who has truly revealed himself, supremely in Christ. Truth matters, and not all worship is equal.

Second, by joining “truth” to “spirit,” Jesus rules out the idea that worship is simply whatever feels meaningful to us. “In truth” means worship shaped by God’s revelation, offered in the way he has shown. This is the positive form of the principle your congregation holds dear: we do what God has authorized, gladly, because we trust that he knows how he wishes to be approached. We are not free to invent worship and assume God will be pleased.

Guard the class from two ditches. On one side is the spirit of the age that says sincerity is all that matters and any heartfelt expression is acceptable worship. On the other side is a cold literalism that reduces worship to a checklist of correct items performed without love. Jesus closes both

ditches at once. Worship must be true, governed by revelation, and it must be in spirit, offered from a heart that loves the God it knows.

Bring it home positively. The point is not mainly what we may not do, but the glad confidence that we may draw near in the very way the Father has opened. Present authorized worship as a gift: we do not have to guess how to please God, because he has shown us, and the way he has shown leads straight to a throne of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship is directed to the God who has truly revealed himself, not to an unknown power (John 4:22).
- Salvation is from the Jews; the true God has made himself known in the line that leads to Christ.
- Worship “in truth” is shaped by God’s revelation, not by human preference or invention.
- The positive regulative idea: we gladly worship in the way God has authorized.
- Sincerity does not by itself make worship acceptable; it must also be true.
- Correct form does not by itself make worship acceptable; it must also be in spirit.
- Authorized worship is a gift and a confidence, not merely a set of restrictions.

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage answer the popular idea that worship is “whatever feels meaningful to me”?
- How does it also answer cold, heartless ritual?
- Why is it good news, not bad news, that God has shown us how to approach him?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole conversation at the well: a seeking God, a known and loved woman, worship in spirit and in truth. Name one specific way Jesus is reshaping your understanding of worship, and one concrete change you will make this week so that you come to God with both a sincere heart and a glad submission to his truth.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole conversation: a seeking God, a known and loved woman, and worship defined as spirit and truth. Ask students to step back and name what has shifted in their understanding of worship.

Press for one concrete change. The lesson should not end as an idea admired but as a life adjusted. Some will need to recover the warmth of the heart; others will need to submit more

gladly to God's pattern; still others will need simply to come expectant, knowing they are sought.

Close with Christ. The woman left her water jar and ran to tell her town about a man who told her everything she ever did. True worship begins where she began, with a heart laid bare before Jesus and then lifted up to the Father in glad, truthful praise. Encourage your class to leave the room as she did, changed, and eager to draw near again.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship in spirit and truth as the settled pattern of the disciple's life.
- The personal transformation worship is meant to produce.
- Christ as the one who reveals the Father and opens the way to true worship.
- The movement from a heart exposed by Jesus to a heart lifted in praise.

Discussion Prompts

- What has most changed in your understanding of worship through this passage?
- What is the one concrete step you will take this week to worship in spirit and truth?
- How does meeting Jesus, as the woman did, become the starting point of real worship?