

Heart of Worship

Lesson 1: What Is Worship? Spirit and Truth -- John 4:19-24

She came to the well at noon, which tells you almost everything you need to know about her. The other women of Sychar came in the cool of the morning, in groups, talking and laughing as they drew the day's water. She came alone, in the heat, when no one else would be there. Five husbands had come and gone, and the man she lived with now was not her husband, and a town that small does not forget. So she came when the well was empty. And there, in the one place she thought she could be invisible, she found a tired Jewish rabbi sitting on the edge of the stone, who knew her whole story before she said a word, and who offered her living water anyway.

When Jesus touched the wound in her life, she did what many of us do when a conversation gets too close. She changed the subject to religion. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, she said, and you Jews say the place to worship is in Jerusalem. It was the great argument of her people, Samaritan against Jew, this mountain against that temple, and she reached for it like a shield. But Jesus would not let her hide behind a debate about locations. The hour is coming, he told her, when the question will no longer be where you worship, but how, and to whom, and from what kind of heart.

That is a stunning thing to say to a woman like her. She expected Jesus to talk about a building, a city, a holy place she could visit on the right day. Instead he talked about her spirit. He told her that the Father is seeking worshipers, that God himself is out looking for people who will draw near in spirit and in truth. Not a place God wants, but a person. Not the right address, but the right heart, offered to him in the way he has shown. The God of heaven, it turns out, is not waiting passively to be visited. He is searching, like a man at a well at noon, for someone to worship him.

Maybe you have wondered what worship really is. Perhaps it has become, for you, a thing you attend, an hour with a familiar shape, songs and prayers and a sermon, something you do because Sunday comes around again. Or perhaps you have swung the other way and decided that worship is whatever stirs your feelings, whatever moves you in the moment, however you choose to express it. Jesus, sitting at the well, will not let us settle for either one. He defines worship for us in a single unforgettable phrase, in spirit and in truth, and he ties it to the very nature of God. Read his words slowly. They are meant to reach past the question of where we worship to the deeper question of who we are when we come.

Group Discussion: If you stopped ten people on the street and asked them what worship is, you would probably get ten different answers, from singing, to feeling close to God, to going to a building on Sunday. Before we open the passage, how would you put it into words? What do you think worship actually is, and where do most people get their picture of it?

Personal Reflection: Jesus says the Father is seeking worshipers who will come to him in spirit and in truth. When you come to worship, whether in the assembly or alone, what is usually going on inside you? Are you genuinely drawing near to a Person, or mostly going through motions that have grown familiar? Be honest with yourself about where your heart tends to be.

Read John 4:19–24

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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.”

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Philippians 3:3, we worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus, putting no confidence in the flesh; Romans 12:1, presenting ourselves as living sacrifices, our spiritual act of worship; Hebrews 12:28–29, offering acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire; Psalm 145:18, the Lord is near to all who call on him in truth; John 4:34, Jesus' food was to do the will of the One who sent him, the same heart that drives true worship.