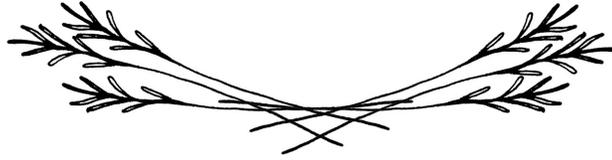


WEEK 9

# THE CHURCH & WORSHIP



DR. JEREMY BARRIER WITH LORI EASTEP

Like a cut gem, the church has many facets. But arguably the most fundamental facet, and the most recognizable to the outside world, is that of worship. In this chapter, we'll explore what worship is, what it does, and how it impacts our spiritual lives.

## **Worship Is an Act of Humility**

I can't get enough of BBC television. I love the formality, the intellectual humor, the accents... oh, how I love the accents. And one thing that always stands out to me is the deference with which the lords and ladies of old Britain are treated. They never enter a room without a flurry of bows and curtsies, head nods and tipped hats.

There's something majestic about it, something regal, and it stands in sharp contrast to modern society. We've built an egocentric generation insistent on its own rights and cultivated a culture in which my personal happiness, my individual desires trump the happiness and desires of all others. As the saying goes, "We bow to no one." And though there's no doubting the blessing that comes with that ultimate freedom, it is perhaps an unintended consequence that we struggle with the idea of worship as an act of humility.

There's a dizzying amount of "falling down" that occurs in Scripture. Time and again, when introduced to God made flesh, individuals fall down and worship him (Matt 2:11; 9:18; 15:25; 28:9). They recognize that something remarkable is taking place before their eyes, and that they've entered into the presence of someone greater than themselves. In our worship, too, we are recognizing the presence of someone greater than ourselves, figuratively kneeling before the Father. J. Oswald Sanders said, "In the act of worship, God communicates His presence to His people." And that presence is worthy of our awe and adoration.

The Greek word *proskuneo*, used 60 times in the New Testament, is most often translated "to worship" or "to bow down." The word is a compound of two parts together meaning, "kissing the hand toward"; it's derived from the idea of a dog licking his master's hand. It's not an image that would be considered attractive to the average 21<sup>st</sup> century American, but what an excellent way to describe the meekness with which we approach the throne of the Almighty—with boldness, yes (Heb 4:16), but also with the submissive attitude that allowed the Christ to pray, "Not as I will, but as you will" (Mark 14:36).

### **Worship Is a Public Declaration**

I consider Acts 4:32–37 to be one of the most fascinating texts in Scripture. The passage introduces the reader to Barnabas, who was known for his encouraging leadership and his great benevolence. In this passage, Barnabas sells a piece of land and gives the proceeds from the sale to the church so that they can distribute the funds to feed, clothe, and house the community of Christians gathered in Jerusalem. One of the key moments is found in verses 32–34:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.<sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.<sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them...

On first glance, it's a bit confusing that we jump from the principles of the believers having "one heart and soul" to the apostles preaching sermons, then to believers selling land and giving to the needy. How are these three seemingly separate ideas connected in the mind of the author? After some thought, however, the mental leaps become clear. The believers' worship was something that happened frequently, with purpose, and this was the one time when all three of these events in the text were most clearly displayed. Christians gathered together, and you could *see* how they were connected in their hearts and souls. You could *see* them lifting up God in praise of Jesus, the resurrected one. You could *see* them giving of their funds to help the needy. Meeting regularly as an institution is one of the ways that we, as people of faith, make a public declaration to our communities and the world that we are here to have a single purpose. We are here to lift up our God. We are here to say to our community, "If you are needy, come."

### **Worship Should Be An Act of Sincerity**

Most of you can probably quote Isaiah 29:13, just as Jesus did (Matt 15:8): "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Nothing frustrated Jesus more than insincere worshippers, and the Scriptures are full of his admonitions to set aside the rote and the ritual for something better, something more complete. But my favorite line of Isaiah's passage comes in verse 16, when he says, "You turn things

upside down!” When we go through the motions of worship and fail to engage our hearts, or when we faultily assume that our attendance “checkbox” has earned us points in God’s eyes, we’ve got our worship turned upside down. It’s like offering someone a wrapped box with no gift inside.

In Zechariah 7:5–6, God asks the Israelites, “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you were fasting? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?” In layman’s terms, *Is your heart in it? Is this for me or for you?* God has always been just as concerned with our motives as He is with our actions. And he asks each of us, *Is your heart in it? Is this for me or for you?*

The bad news is that the Israelites had the wrong answer. “They refused to pay attention,” continues Isaiah 7:11. “Stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears.” They were fulfilling their obligations physically, but spiritually, they had disengaged. The good news is that each of us gets to choose. No matter the “worship atmosphere” of your congregation, no matter what the people around you are doing, you get to choose the aroma of your sacrifice of praise to God (Heb 13:15).

And when our actions come from a place of sincerity, good things necessarily follow. Our worship becomes purer, deeper, and more joyful. We read in Acts 2:46 of the early Christians who met together with “glad and sincere hearts,” and the very next verse describes the daily (yes, daily!) additions to the body of believers. Why? Sincere worship is contagious. C.S. Lewis once said, “It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is”; in the same way, when we begin to truly worship the Almighty, when we have tasted that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8), our desire to share him will naturally grow.

## Worship As a Part of Life

Finally, as an extension of the idea that worship is an act of humility, worship is part of who we are. We are constantly living in a state of awareness that there is a God, and we are not him! I vividly remember hearing the preacher Charles Hodge's simple and profound prayer: "Dear God, You are God, and I am not!" This prayer can be developed into an attitude that can be taken with us wherever we go. One of the best passages dealing with worship as a lifestyle has to be the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29–37. As the story goes, there was a man who was on his way to Jericho, having left Jerusalem, when he was robbed, beaten and left for dead on the road. Two men passed by him, did not help him and kept going. The third person to pass was the one who helped him: this was the Samaritan.

The first and second men, a priest and Levite respectively, were employed in the daily service of the Temple. This means that they not only coordinated worship times, but that they tended to the noncorporate facets of Temple life as well—in essence, service for the Temple that was not a direct worship to God. The Samaritan was not employed in such a profession, and by definition of being a "Samaritan," he would not have even attended worship times at the Temple (see John 4:20). In short, the irony here is that those who should have understood how important it is to honor God everyday, did not. The one who did not understand the importance of the Temple in Jerusalem, did understand worship and service to God on a daily basis.

Worship is more than a ritual we perform during a particular hour of a particular day. Our corporate services are only the beginning, only a starting point, for the sincere,

humble, worshipful manner of our lives. May we not forget that God cares about our attitude every day, and not only on Sunday.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What is the purpose of worship?
2. How does the New Testament describe proper Christian worship?
3. Does worship have a role in evangelism?
4. What are some specific steps we can take to ensure that our worship is not “upside down”, or insincere?