

16. THE FATHER SEEKS TRUE WORSHIPPERS (4:23-24)

Many times verses 23-24 are interpreted as referring to what Christians do on Sunday mornings—how we worship as a congregation. Although we can make that application to a certain degree, if that is all we focus on, it misses the point of the passage. What we need to bear in mind the context of the passage. These verses are found in a gospel – a time long before the church was essentially founded in Acts chapter 2. Secondly, Jesus is talking to a Samaritan, an unbelieving gentile. Someone who is not in a Christian worship environment of any sort. This is an evangelistic encounter where He is addressing her heart, and not a church governance discussion.

Before we proceed, there are a few more matters regarding historical context of the Samaritans that we need to address.

SAMARITAN VS JEWISH WORSHIP

The proper place of worship was a source of debate between the Samaritans and Jews for centuries. For the Samaritans, Mount Gerizim is the place where God chose for His sanctuary (See Deu. 12:5, 11, 21, 26; 14:24-25; 16:6; 17:8; 18:6; 26:2), and is their equivalent to Mount Zion in Jerusalem for the Jews

Mount Gerizim has a chequered past.⁷⁵

- From the time of the building of the Samaritan temple in 388 BC, Samaria functioned as a temple-state under the leadership of its own priestly aristocracy.
- During a period of Greek domination, the Samaritan temple was renamed the Temple of Zeus, the Friend of Strangers (from 2 Maccabees 6:2).
- After the Maccabean success, the Samaritan temple was attacked and destroyed by the Hasmonean priest-king John Hyrcanus in 128 BC (from *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13). This act sealed a permanent rift between the two communities and to a large extent underlies the hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans reflected in the New Testament (v9).
- Emperor Hadrian built another temple to Zeus there in the second century AD.
- The Christian emperor, Justinian, constructed an octagonal-shaped church above the ruins of the ancient temple in the sixth century AD, which was destroyed by the Arabs in the seventh century.

Archaeological discoveries on the mountain include remains from Justinian's church, Hadrian's temple, and the first temple destroyed by John Hyrcanus.

The Samaritans only recognise the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) as Scripture. Like the Jews, they expect a Messiah who is a prophet like Moses who will one day restore them and their sanctuary (cf. Deu. 18). But because they do not have the rest of the Old Testament scriptures, their understanding of the Messiah is limited and refer to Him as the Restorer. This tradition is mentioned in a Samaritan document called the *Memar Marqah* written in the fourth century AD. It states, "Let the Restorer come

⁷⁵ NIV Archaeological Study Bible, p1727.

safely and sacrifice a true offering. The Restorer will come in peace and reveal the truth and will purify the world and establish the heads of the people as they once were” (*Memar Marqah*, 2:33,70,180). However, unlike the Jews, the Samaritans were not expecting the Restorer to deal with the political situation in the land, but merely restore the religious system. The Samaritan woman reflects this expectation in verse 25, to which Jesus replies in verse 26, “*I who speak to you am He*”.

This background helps us to understand the Samaritan woman’s and Jesus’ references to worship in verses 1 to 26, and her question as she witnesses to the people of Samaria in verse 29, “*Can this be the Christ?*”.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How would you define worship and its impact in your life?
2. What is your motivation for attending church?
3. What are some things in your life that tend to become distractions and get in the way of your worship of God?

THREE ELEMENTS OF TRUE WORSHIP

Our focus in this study is on several key words in verses 23 and 24, and from them we learn three aspects of true worship that all Christians need to address in their private and corporate worship. To make sure we understand them in context, read John 4:19-26.

NOTE: Although these verses are often interpreted as referring to what we do on Sunday mornings, that is, how we worship as a congregation, that is not the complete picture. We can most certainly make that application, but if that is all we focus on, we miss the heart of the passage. We need to bear the immediate context in mind. Firstly, these verses are found in a gospel a time long before the church was established in Acts 2. Secondly, Jesus is talking to a Samaritan, an unbelieving gentile who is not in a Christian worship environment of any sort. This is an evangelistic encounter where Jesus addresses her heart, and is not one of church governance or liturgy. Thirdly, Jesus refers to something that everyone does in various settings, and not only in the church, worship – everyone worships something as it is part of how God designed man (see Rom. 1:25). Because of sin many are blind and constantly put their trust in worthless objects and idle practices. This means that there is a difference between true worship and false worship.

The Necessity of True Worship – “must”

The first word we will focus on is “*must*” in verse 24, “*those who worship him MUST worship in spirit and truth*”. This word implies a command or an imperative that the subject connected to the word must obey – in this case, all those who worship the Father. However, we are living in a society where no one likes to be told what they must do. Especially when one disagrees with the instruction. Many will gladly obey the things that they enjoy or think will have a benefit for them, but will ignore or disobey those they do not like or fail to see the benefit of.

But note that Jesus is not simply saying that the Father seeks those who worship Him, but is prescribing a particular type of worship – worship that is *“in spirit and truth”*. Those who do so, God calls true worshippers in verse 23. This implies not only that there is a false way to worship in that we can worship foreign gods, but that it is also possible to worship the Father in the wrong way.

In the modern church there is a misconception in that we as the followers determine how God wants to be worshipped – such as, what constitutes worship and what is excluded – and often neglects every aspect of a church service and the things we do the rest of the week outside of church that glorify God (cf. 1Co. 10:11). Some have also become like the Jews and Samaritans by thinking that worship only happens when people gather in a particular place to perform a specific activity.

But Jesus is calling us to a particular way of worship. A type of worship that is different to what the world classifies as worship. A nature of worship that is opposite to your sinful desires and may even go against your personal tastes.

As Sovereign Creator, God gets to dictate how He is to be worshipped and not man, therefore, it is imperative that we consider our attitude. Worship is a high calling that God has placed on His people that goes beyond choosing some songs that people will enjoy or may draw people into the church every Sunday.

In fact, some songs that truly worship God and express the Gospel may turn people away from the church. Songs that some church may choose not to sing simply to remain relevant to the modern culture or draw more people. But worship is not about being relevant or popular, it is about doing what God has called us to do.

Jesus says here in John 4:24, that we MUST worship God in spirit and truth, and so it is all our responsibility as Christians to heed the command.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How does the word *“must”* in 4:24 challenge what you have typically thought about your approach to worship?
2. How does busy activity and emotional sensationalism get in the way of worship that *“must be in spirit and truth”*?

The Object of True Worship – “the Father”

This is seen in the word *“him”* in verse 24, which refers to the Father, as seen in verse 23, *“true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him”*.

This truth is emphasised throughout Scripture (cp. Exo. 20:1-5, 23:13, 34:14; Deu. 6:13-14; 2Ki. 17:35-36; Psa. 96:4-5; Isa. 42:8; Mat. 4:8-10; Rom. 11:36; Rev. 22:8-9).

Since God is to be the exclusive object of our worship, it follows then that we can not worship our ancestors, the devil, angels, any living being including self, nor wealth, fame, or power. God is the only audience of true worship and is to be worshipped for who He is and what He has done.

But there is an important implication here. It can only be done by those who truly know Him. This is because worship is an expression of thankfulness for what He has done and is a declaration of His nature as God. But you cannot do that if you have not experienced His mercy and grace in your life nor have personal knowledge of Him. When you have never come to Him with your sin, repented, and asked for His forgiveness. There are many people in the church who do not truly know God nor are they in a relationship with Him. They are Christian in name only, having never tasted salvation.

But this not only affects your time in church, it also affects your daily lives (cf. 1Co. 10:11). So whether one is singing worship songs in the car or at home, having personal or family devotions, spending time in prayer, reading and studying the Bible, at work or play, or simply eating and drinking, one is to do it giving glory to God (i.e. worship) alone.

If this is not the case then it is directed towards something or someone else, and more often than not, it is directed towards self, all of which is idolatry, and is a contravention of the first two commandments (Exo. 20:1-5).

But what is God like?

There are several attributes given in Scripture, but Jesus uses one here that is important to our discussion. He states in verse 24 that "*God is spirit*". This is a classic biblical definition of the nature of God that means He is invisible and divine as opposed to man (cp. Exo. 33:20; Col. 1:15; cf. 1 Tim. 1:17, 6:16; Heb. 11:27). God is not physical, rather, His essential nature is spirit. Nor is He an exalted man as some heretics taught (cf. Num. 23:19). Likewise, God is not a force or power that pervades everything in nature, such as the pantheistic gods of the Hindus. No, God is a living spirit, a being who thinks, chooses, loves, acts, and communicates with man.

These are all fundamental truths key to understanding God's nature and the kind of worship He demands. Because He is spirit, it eliminates pagan gods of stone or metal, graven images, icons, statues of human beings (biblical or not) or animal, human beings and everything in nature as possible objects of worship.

Furthermore, because God is spirit, we cannot comprehend Him directly with our physical senses, and unless He reveals Himself in some way, He is unknowable. But the amazing thing is that He has indeed chosen to reveal himself (see Heb. 1:1-2). Therefore, it is necessary for us to make sure we get to know Him by learning about Him through the prophets of the Old Testament, the Word become flesh in the New Testament, and through a personal relationship with Him as the Holy Spirit who dwells in us teaches and reminds us of Him.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. The Bible gives several attributes for God. List those that you know with a short explanation for each. Which of these attributes is your favourite to describe God and why?
2. Idol worship may take different forms. What are some false gods that people can make a higher priority than the true God?

The Nature of True Worship – “in spirit and truth”

Notice that Jesus uses the phrase “*spirit and truth*” twice in our two verses. Whenever you see something repeated in Scripture it means that it is important and something to take note of.

Now there are some who say that this phrase refers to the Holy Spirit. This, however, cannot be the case, as in the Greek there is no definite article in front of the word spirit to refer to a specific spirit. Also, Jesus is talking to a Samaritan woman who has no idea who the Holy Spirit is. By only recognising the first five books of the Old Testament and rejecting the rest, they do not have most of the relevant texts that speak of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Joel).

Others split the phrase into two parts and claim that to worship God in spirit means to worship Him from the heart, while to worship in truth means to worship Him as He directs us in His Word.

Although each of those things is correct and can to a certain degree apply here, none of them fit the immediate context of the passage. What you need to take note of is that in verses 23 and 24, the preposition “*in*” governs both nouns. In other words, these are not two separate characteristics of true worship, but they are inseparably linked to one another. Together these three words, “*spirit and truth*”, form a single term expressing one thing. If you remember, we saw a similar thing back in 3:5 with the phrase, “*born of water and the Spirit*” where the “*of*” refers to both nouns making “*water and the spirit*” a single term. This use is also evident in the Old Testament (e.g. Neh. 9:20, 30; Psa. 33:6; 147:18; Isa. 59:21), and it is entirely possible that this is the connection that Jesus has in mind.

What then does the term mean?

Quite simply it means to worship in a manner that is fitting with the nature of God. As Jesus the Word made flesh (cf. 1:14) and “*the truth*” (cf. 14:6), He is essentially the embodiment of “*spirit and truth*”. This is seen in our text in that Jesus says that “*God is spirit*” in verse 24, and through the contrasts that He infers in verses 21 and 22.

- He reminds the woman of the Jewish and Samaritan worship practices. For both the Jews and Samaritans there was a physical place where they had to worship, the temple in Jerusalem or the altar on Mount Gerizim. But Jesus is saying that irrespective of where they worshipped, the time was coming when location would no longer be important.

- He's also making a contrast between the Old and New Testament styles of worship. Both the Jews and Samaritans had a priesthood, special instruments, and furniture. There were also the physical acts of burning incense, circumcision, feast days, and animal sacrifices. All of these appeal to the physical senses of man, but all of them are merely a shadow of the reality that was to come (cp. Heb. 10:1), and indeed, as Jesus says in verse 23, had arrived and is with His people.

As the writer of Hebrews tells us several times, all of the Old Testament elements of worship have been replaced by something better – Christ and spiritual worship (e.g. 9:1-10). For example, God's temple is now made up of Christians (cf. 1Co. 3:16; Eph. 2:19-22), who are all priests offering themselves as living spiritual sacrifices (cf. 1Pe. 2:5,9), with Christ serving as the High Priest in the spiritual realm (cf. Heb. 4:14-15; 9:11-12, 24). Our prayers are like the incense of old (cf. Rev. 5:8). Music is made in our hearts (cf. Eph. 5:19) that join with the chorus of heaven, the spiritual realm, and not merely with physical instruments before men. There is a circumcision of the heart (cf. Rom. 2:25-29) and a fellowship with believers across the world, that is expressed as we gather together with other believers in the local church encouraging each other not only with our words and actions, but by simply being together (cf. Heb. 10:25).

The emphasis is now on the spirit and not on the physical. A worship that is in the spiritual realm of God Himself who is spirit. So despite where they worship, and despite that they may worship in accordance with the Law of Moses, both the Jews and the Samaritans failed to worship “*in spirit and truth*”, despite the Jews having a more complete understanding of the truth.

The Old Testament prophets spoke of a time when worship would no longer be confined to a specific location but the earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (cf. Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14). We can worship God anywhere. We are no longer confined to a physical place, nor to things that are but a shadow. However, this does not mean that we can worship alone in our homes and never attend church (cf. Psa. 133; Heb. 10:25), nor in any way we want – as already discussed – but needs to match the nature of God who is Spirit and truth.

The book of Revelation also concludes with a vision of the consummated kingdom, the new Jerusalem, in which there is no temple “*for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*” (21:22). The fulfillment of that vision has not yet arrived in its fullness. However, Jesus implies that the hour is dawning with His arrival and God's people have a foretaste of the consummation to come. So when we worship in this manner today, whether privately or corporately, God is with us in a way that is different and greater than what the Old Testament believers experienced because He is in us and not merely with us, but will be even greater in the New Jerusalem when we will see the one whom we worship with our eyes.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. What are some worship practices within the modern church that you would say are NOT “*in spirit and truth*”? Why do you say that?

2. What direction would you give to those who say they do not need to attend church because they can worship God from home, online, or in nature?
3. Have you ever "gone through the motions" of worship without worshipping? How can you worship in a way more pleasing to God?

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we conclude, let us consider some of the things that constitute false worship to highlight what true worship looks like, and consider one final implication:

Examples of False Worship

- **Vain worship (cf. Mat. 15:1-9):** Jesus refers to the traditions of man that the Pharisees were holding to religiously, while at the same time ignoring God's commands. They honour God with their lips, but their heart is far from Him. This means that we can simply go through the motions of worship without our spirits, hearts, emotions, thoughts, etc. being involved.
- **Ignorant worship (cf. Acts 17:16-21):** Paul reminds us that we can participate in worship that ignores the nature and will of God. As such, we can worship in what we do not know (cp. John 4:22) in ways that we do not understand.
- **Self-focused worship (cf. John 4:24):** This is worship that is not God-focussed. That is, we do what we like in our worship, what we think is right. Where songs, prayers, etc. are all about us and not about God.
- **Worldly worship:** Worship that not only looks and sounds like the world, but is also appealing to the world.

Just because we label something as worship and attach God's name to it does not mean that it is true worship that pleases Him.

Appealing to the Old Testament

We need to remember that we can no longer appeal to the Old Testament for absolute direction on what needs to be part of our physical worship – although some things may be beneficial or pleasant, they are merely a shadow of the reality that is Christ. Here are several ways that we cannot use the Old Testament in directing our worship:

- It does not dictate what instruments we must use or the type of music we should play.
- It does not tell us whether we should burn incense or not, nor what type of incense to use.
- It does not tell us what oils to use or anointing.
- We cannot use it to justify dancing or clapping in church.
- Paul reminds us too in Colossians 2:16 that we must not judge others, nor allow ourselves to be judged, when we hold to certain feasts or the Sabbath. They are merely expressions that appeal to the flesh and our physical senses and not the spirit.

Instead we need to look to the New Testament and understand how Christ has changed things. To worship in ways ordained by Christ and His apostles.

Let us worship God alone in spirit and truth.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Using the three elements of worship discussed in this study as your guide, what are some practical ways you can worship God in the way that He desires?