

Does God Need Worship

True Worship:

Acts 17:22-31

February 19, 2006

Rick Phillips

Scripture Reading: Acts 17:22-31

As I was sitting here listening to the scripture reading it suddenly struck me that Paul is teaching an *Alpha Course*, he's a first century Niki Gumbel! He's talking to seekers, the very same target as *Alpha*, people trying to come to grips with their lives either because they feel something is missing or because they want to learn more about an UNKNOWN GOD. He's talking to cynics, doubters and intellectuals. These people did not know about the God of the Jews, they did not know about Christ: but they wanted to know more. They had so many gods and idols they needed a 'yellow pages' just to keep track of them. What he's teaching them about is the one true God and how to worship Him.

Today we are starting a brand new sermon series. This is a series about True Worship and during this series we'll be looking at how God seeks worshipers who relate to him, worship as an authentic response to God rather than a series of organized parties or actions, what worship is not and how do you actually feel about God?

When I was asked if I'd like to give the sermon today I jumped at the chance - because I like to talk about God. Then I asked what the topic of the sermon was and Wes said "Does God Need Worship?" The first thought going through my mind was "Is this a trick question?" And then I thought "Well DAAH!!!" This is going to be a short sermon; Offertory, benediction and we're outa here. Now I'm in trouble because rather than the service going over an hour, we're done in less than an hour.

As I thought about it more and more, the answer was not so obvious. I started asking myself questions like 'What is worship?', 'What does God really need?'

God created us as spiritual beings. The Bible tells us the reason for our existence is to worship. We have been made in God's image, that's who we are, created for devotion and praise. Worship is the hub of our lives. We have a need to worship. But what is worship and what do we worship? Worship is one of those words we all intuitively use but probably really don't know what it means. Do you? So in order to answer the question 'Does God Need Worship?' we have to look at two things. First, just what is worship? Secondly, we have to look at the definition of 'need'

So let's take a look at worship first.

I don't know about you, but every week when I come into worship I do the same thing. I sit down and open the bulletin and you know what I am looking for. I'm looking for my favorite song. I'm looking for the hymn, praise music or choir anthem that I want to hear, who is sick that I may not know about, events I may want to take advantage of and I usually just brush aside the melon colored insert. I'm looking for things that will make me feel good, things that I like. But my attitude toward worship at those moments is not

quite right. I don't really understand what worship is all about. I am looking for what pleases me, and I am not asking the question,

How can I be here to offer something to God that will please Him?

I am looking for my wants and my desires to be met, not for how I can offer my life to God. So let's try to gain a deeper understanding of what worship is all about. What is this thing we do every week and why do we do it?

Dallas Willard, a professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California, defines worship as:

The intentional turning of the mind to God and ascribing to God all of the greatness and goodness and glory that belongs to Him.

You can do that sitting perfectly silently; you can do that dancing with joy; you can do that singing great hymns; you can do it sitting with a friend, holding a hand, praying about your life together. The basic idea in worship is the intentional turning of your mind to God and crediting to Him all of the good things and the great things that you have learned about Him.

In Romans 12:1 Paul says:

Therefore, in view of God's mercies, present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God, and this is your spiritual act of worship.

That tells me a couple of things about what worship really is about. The first one is:

that worship is meant to be active not passive.

Presenting your body as a living sacrifice is an active thing to do. Worship is not something we watch. Worship is something we do, it involves us.

That is one of the reasons we sing. Singing involves all of us. We sing partly because God commands us to in the Old and the New Testaments, but also because it is active and involves us. It involves our bodies, our voices, and our breath.

Worship is meant to be active. When we sing we should be active and pay attention to what the words mean. If you can't carry a tune in a wheelbarrow, so what! The point is you're involved. Even when someone is up here praying we should engage and follow along, pray along with the pastor. Worship is meant to be active.

But it's deeper than that. Worship isn't just actively coming as we are.

Worship happens when we dedicate our whole lives entirely to God.

Paul says we should present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God means to present everything we have, our arms, our legs, our hands, our feet, our time, our agenda, and our money, even things we're ashamed of like our fears, our sins, and our

failures. Jesus wants those too. It's taking everything we have and saying, Here I am Lord. It is all yours.

That's why giving fits in with Worship, whether with your time, your talents or your money. By our giving, we acknowledge the worthiness of what God is doing in our lives, and we get a chance to participate in it. We give, not just in church. Giving, like worship, is an atmosphere in which we live. It is a part of love. It honors the God that we worship by accepting His invitation to be a part of what He is doing.

In the book of Revelation Chapter 4 there's a scene where all the saints in heaven are praising Jesus, and when they see him they take off their golden crowns and cast them at his feet. That's a symbol of taking everything they have; their wealth, their position, their accomplishments, their plans and giving them all to Jesus.

Worship isn't just sitting in a church and singing songs. Worship is what you give your body to, your life, your time, your energy, and your attention. By that definition I think we worship a lot of different things. We all worship something, the question is it God. We worship our reputations, our careers, our finances, our relationships, our tastes and desires. Show me your calendar and your checkbook and I'll show you what you worship.

We are told in Acts:

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. (Acts 17:23 NIV)

Each of these objects we worship, outside of God, tends to be transitory. Their worth is known for short periods of time and then we move on to our next object of worship. We move on to our next UNKNOWN GOD.

We even worship worship, the kind of worship that we like. Worship is what you give your energy to. The question is, are you giving your energy to God?

True biblical worship is when we give our time, energy and whole lives to Jesus Christ. That's why every week it would be nice if someone would come up and for a few minutes tell us

how their life has been changed by a ministry in this church or
how they've gone on a mission trip or
how they've served in a Bible study

because when you

go on a mission trip, or
serve in a Bible study, or
reach out to a neighbor,

that is worship. That's one of the reasons we take an offering, because in a culture that worships money, when we drop a check into the offering plate what we are saying to

God, in a culture that worships money, take my whole life, it's yours, including my money.

Giving and Prayer - are really the two main ways that we begin to take steps into the Kingdom of God. We come through faith in Jesus. He receives us and gives us new life. Giving and Prayer are opportunities for us to participate in what God is doing. It is OUR opportunity. We are saying everything belongs to God.

And that leads us to the deepest meaning of worship.

The deepest meaning of worship is when we forget about ourselves and focus on God.

Worship happens when we take our attention off of ourselves, our problems, our agendas, our desires, our tastes, our reputations and focus them on to God. And then when we do that we are lifted out of the trivial and the trying moments of our life and we are taken into the inspirational. I don't know about you, but I don't exactly live my life in the inspirational vein all the time. I certainly don't come into a worship service with this all inspired feeling, trailing clouds of glory behind me with a little halo over my head.

No, that is not how I come to worship.

No, I come to worship fully focused and fixated on

ME and
MY NEEDS and
MY WANTS and
MY PROBLEMS.

I come with all the trivial and trying stuff of my life and maybe you do too.

See if this sounds maybe just a little bit familiar. The alarm goes off on a Sunday morning and you realize that unlike Saturday you can't sleep in. Why? Because you have to go worship the Lord today and it's ten below outside, windy and snowing. So you wake the kids, if you have any and their just about as happy about it as you are and you get them dressed, and

everyone's rushing around eating breakfast and getting dressed, and
you get out the door, and
you rush out and get in the car, and
you are hurrying because now you are late to worship the Lord.

Maybe on the way you and your wife get into a discussion about how bad it is to rush to church. You get to church and start looking for a parking space and there are none left. You finally find one, but just as you're about to pull in someone darts in ahead of you and takes the space. You would like to honk the horn but you have a Christian bumper sticker on your car and you are going to church. So all you can do is nod and give him a 'Jesus loves you smile' and move on and look for another parking spot, which you find half a block down the street. Then you walk a long way and you come in and you're looking around for your favorite seat but someone has taken it so you end up sitting in the back row behind a very tall person so you can't really see or hear, but you say to yourself I am now going to worship and I better enjoy it. You see, even when we

come to church our lives can be cluttered with the trivial, the trying, the tempting, and the tiresome.

And what worship is, even in the midst of all of that, is when we actively as an act of our will, forget about ourselves, bring our whole lives to God, and focus on Jesus Christ who died for us because He loved us so much.

Because this is not about us, but Jesus Christ; we don't worship a particular music style, we don't worship a pastor and we don't worship our church.

We worship Jesus Christ. This whole thing is about Jesus. That's why we begin each service with prayer. That's why we read the scripture to remind ourselves of who Jesus is. That's why we have hymns, praise music and choir anthems.

Some of them are loud and upbeat as a bold proclamation of the truth of Jesus Christ. Others are quiet and meditative as a chance for us to pray and reflect on who God is. All are meant to get our minds out of the trivial and the trying and focus on Jesus Christ.

Last January I was part of a leadership team on the Walk to Emmaus and as we were listening to a talk I started thinking about what my plans for my life were four years ago and how, if I had it my way, I would have been sitting at a computer writing programs. Instead, God has given me a real meaning for living. Suddenly I just started saying to God, over and over again,

Thank you, you knew better. Thank you God.

Suddenly I forgot about how the talk was going and all I could do was focus on how good God was, and the more I saw that the more I was moved to tears. For me that was worship. I was actively involved. I was coming just as I was, a mess. But I had forgotten myself and I was focused on God, and because of that I was ready to follow God to the moon and back. I was ready to give him my whole life. That is worship.

Now to answer the question about God's needs.

What does he need from us? The key verse in Acts tells us:

And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. (Acts 17:25 NIV)

Any time you pass by anything of great beauty, or value, or strength, and you don't acknowledge it for what it is, you rob yourself. It is the same with our relationship with God. God is not a cosmic egotist who is waiting here for you all to show up and say good things about Him. He's not in trouble and needs our help because His work is in trouble. He is not self-centered. He is not dependant on us for His wellbeing. What can we provide that He has not created already? He will not throw a temper tantrum if He is not worshiped. He doesn't need those things. He has a wonderful, sufficient community called the Trinity. Here are these magnificent Beings - too One to be Many and too Many to be One - that are just lost in the glory of the goodness of Their life. We are, however,

invited to be a part of that. In fact, we were created to be a part of that and then to extend that into the world in which we live.

As the verse in Jeremiah says:

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jer 31:33 NIV)

We are like moths in the darkness of the night, fluttering aimlessly in the dark, having no direction. And then a light shines in the darkness like a beacon and we are drawn irresistibly to it. And the primary way we come to that light is simply by keeping God in our minds - acknowledging Him for what He is and drawing from Him the things that we need for our lives. It's our need, not God's, that rules here. We desperately need to worship the right thing - to have the right thing constantly before our minds.

I think this is one of the deep teachings of the Prodigal Son - the story that Jesus told. The father did not require any song and dance. In fact, it was the son who had the song and dance planned. He was thinking of how he could manage his life by managing his father. But the father was not giving up.

You will remember that all the son had to say was:

Father I have sinned, (Luke 15:21)

And the arms of the Father around him prevented him from going on. Believe me on this, I shut God out of my life for 46 years. He was always there watching over me, He waited until I was ready. Then He extended an invitation I could not refuse. How thankful I am that God does not give up. He extends an invitation with no RSVP required. He has given us the free will to accept or reject Him. I accepted that invitation, will you?

The ultimate form of worship is when we share communion together. God has given us the greatest gift any father can give, the life and death of His Son. And part of the Communion experience is confession. What you do when you confess is you open yourself up to God. Confession may be just dropping down on your knees and saying to God:

This is how it is. This is who I am. I'm sorry; I've really done some dumb things. I'd like to resume my relationship with you in a way such that there is nothing between us, and I'm walking with You and You're carrying my burden, and I'm rejoicing in You.

At other times our confession may be:

Dear Lord why are you doing this to me? You have given me so many blessings I can't count. What have I done to deserve your love? I love you for being a part of my life.

Wherever you are . . . work or home or church or wherever it may be. Confession is a matter of opening our lives and hearts to God and counting on His acceptance, His will and the power to accept that.

I know what we do here in this hour does not please everybody. To tell you the truth it doesn't always please me. But that's not the question is it? The real question is, does it please God? Are we offering ourselves as a living sacrifice to Him?

A couple of years ago we instituted two services. One traditional and the other contemporary. But you keep coming and you keep being a part of us and I want to tell you how much our church leadership loves you for that. Because that shows spiritual maturity on your part. When you come here, what you are saying is 'this is about Jesus Christ, who bled and died on the cross', and it doesn't matter how we say it, it doesn't matter what style of music we use, it just matters that we say thank you. And our leaders are proud to serve a congregation that has not torn itself apart in "worship wars," but has struggled together to be the family of God, worshipping God with different styles, with different tastes, but doing it together. We are grateful to serve you and be a part of that.

The bottom line is this:

We don't worship a particular style of worship.
We don't worship a certain kind of music.
We don't worship our church.
We don't worship our pastor.

We worship Jesus Christ. It's not about us. It's about a God who created a billion galaxies and yet still calls us by name. It's about a God who before you were born knew your name and who came in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ to find us and who hung on a cross to reconcile us to himself.

In view of all that the only response we can have is to forget about ourselves and take our messed up, walking around, ordinary, full of doubts, trials and tribulations lives and offer it to God and say,

Here I am Lord, I worship you, everything I have is yours.

And of course, there is no way we can do that on our own. The only person who can help us do that is Jesus Christ.

The composer **Ludwig Van Beethoven** incorporated a poem by **Friedrich Schiller** into the last movement of his 9th symphony. It goes like this

O friends, no more these sounds! Let us sing more cheerful songs, more full of joy!

Joy, bright spark of divinity, Daughter of Elysium, Fire-inspired we tread Thy sanctuary. Thy magic power re-unites all that custom has divided; all men become brothers, under the sway of thy gentle wings.

Gladly, like the heavenly bodies Which He sent on their courses through
the splendor of the firmament; thus, brothers, you should run your race,
like a hero going to victory!

You millions, I embrace you. This kiss is for all the world! Brothers, above
the starry canopy there must dwell a loving father.

Do you fall in worship, you millions? World, do you know your creator?
Seek Him in the heavens; above the stars must he dwell.

Come join us in true worship. Open your heart to God.