

Is It Worship If It Stops?

True Worship:

Romans 12:1-2

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As you pull into the parking lot, you finish a five-star spat with your spouse. You quiet your voices before opening the car door. You manage to smile as you enter the church. Now, as you sit in the sanctuary with the purpose of worshiping Jesus, are you able to shake your mind free of the argument? Has your blood pressure settled? Is the gloom hanging on? Nothing is resolved. A ceasefire was imposed. Can you truly worship?

We are discussing *true worship*. True worship is not just a theory; it is something people really do. Many people are overwhelmed by God's love. Forgiveness has changed their hearts, and they are hungry to honor Jesus. Many worship in spirit and truth. They love Jesus who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, died, was buried, rose the third day and ascended into heaven. Many recognize and welcome the Spirit of Christ today. They do not merely pay tribute to Jesus in the past. They are not caught up in some form or tradition of worship. They tune into the Spirit of Jesus who lives among us.

Many of you have felt the presence of God here. God has shown his heart to you as we have sung, prayed, and listened to his word. You have found God opening his hand to you, and received blessing from the one you came to bless. My question to you is this: Can you turn worship on and off like a water spigot?

We just talked about simmering in our pew from an argument we had while in a car. I can say that what I described has never happened to me at Bethany. I walk to church. However, I have walked into this sanctuary in a cloud of gloom. One morning I was confronted by an

angry parishioner right before worship. All the time I was singing and listening, I thought of the exchange and what I'd like to have said. Even though I was the worship leader that moment, I don't think I was in touch with God. Silently, I cried out to him.

I find it interesting that in the Old Testament only the High Priests could actually enter into the presence of God. In the presence of God, the High Priests would offer worship on behalf of the people. However, before they could do that, they would have to remove their ordinary clothes, bathe, and put on special dedicated clothes. They also had to avoid touching unclean things or they would have to wait a period of time. Finally, these priests never entered the presence of God without offering atonement for their personal sins as well as for their people. Now I think there are a host of lessons to be learned there.

One is the concern of defilement and holiness. This Old Testament picture of worship reinforces some words I spoke last Sunday. We, the human race, are all of one blood and family. Our family is like a gang. We were born into a family or gang that is in rebellion to God. Much of our way of life is destructive. It clouds people's view of God, hinders their knowledge and trust in God, and harms subsequent generations. Like crack babies that have special needs, we are sin babies in need of deep healing. As we walk further away from God, our problems become more desperate. This is well illustrated in our current culture.

I affirm fully our constitutional freedom as people to worship God as we see fit. Such freedom, however, does not imply that the government can insulate us from the implications of other people's faith or lack of it. I do not believe court-ordered secularization facilitates religious pluralism. Instead, it imposes an irreligious view of life that encourages people to devote themselves to other gods that promise fulfillment and

meaning. Since the government has taken a more active role in secularizing society, the landscape of America has changed, especially for our children and youth.

Public school teachers were asked to identify the top problems they face. In 1940 the most common response was: “talking out of turn, chewing gum, and making noise.” In 1990 teachers answered: “drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery and assault.” Something has changed dramatically. For one, secularization has led to “*sexualization*”. With the rejection of God, the media, movies, television and music, have all promoted different morals; and now with the internet, pornographic websites have multiplied. They are dogging us all. Did you know that 47 percent of American Christians report that pornography is a major problem in their home? Did you know that 53 percent of Promise Keeper men viewed pornography last week? Did you know that 90 percent of kids between 8 and 16 years old, who go on line, have seen pornography (most while doing their homework)? Did you know who the largest consumers of internet porn are? Children, age 12 to 17! When you read the latest studies about the neuroscience of pornography, you’ll understand why I compare us to crack-babies. We are all children deeply affected by the sin of others and not just our own!

This one aspect of life in the United States illustrates two things. It illustrates (1) why this church was founded with a special call to minister to children – in its early days, half of Bethany’s worshipers were under 12 years of age and the first facility was built with a nursery school in mind; and (2) it demonstrates why true worship is so difficult. The very culture of life, in which we live, is demeaning to God and one another. What the Old Testament priests did physically, we need to do spiritually. We need our hearts washed in the word of Christ and in the forgiveness he offers. The word of Christ exposes our dirt. His forgiveness cleans it away. Then Jesus’ Spirit gives us strength and passion to live differently.

When you and I enter this building after a five-star spat, you know that we've lost touch with God's Spirit. The premise of our argument may have been right, but something impure created an atmosphere of dishonor. Somehow, with all the truth we may have carried, we also were deceived and defiled. Somehow, we missed the Spirit's work of speaking the truth in love. A cloud of gloom does not come from speaking the truth in love. Such an act brings gratitude that God has used us. However, this gloom will actually leave when we bathe in the death of Christ. By that, I mean we die with Christ to our dreams, we die with Christ to our will, and we die with Christ to our sins and their guilt. We then come up from such water with release from our guilt and forgiveness for others; and love for God and love for the ones, with whom we were angry, fill our souls.

When such love fills our souls, we can't stop worshiping God. The song of our tongue becomes the song in our heart as we leave this place. We don't turn off such love or attention to Jesus. We honor his presence as we are cut off by some harried soul on our drive home. We honor his presence as we eat alone, with friends, or with family. We honor God's presence as we exercise, clean house, or earn a living.

The problem is that we walk around in a world that is rebelling. We can easily be defiled and immersed again in gloom. The Apostle, commenting on the power of sin and the great mercy shown us, declared:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2, NIV)

Paul is telling us that we must see all our life as worship. We will respond to our spouse's tart comment in honor of Jesus. Our own ambitions are gone. We are ambitious for Jesus' love and

wisdom to prevail. The standard way of relating that we've observed and practiced is not Christ's way of life. The way we think, the attitudes we develop, are to come from Jesus. What's the attitude of Jesus in our home? What's the attitude of Jesus at our work? What's the attitude of Jesus toward our neighbors? What's the attitude of Jesus in our five-star spat? Embracing Jesus' thinking and acting on it constitute real worship.

Paul went on to say that you and I can't accomplish this alone.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought... (Romans 12:3, NIV)

He said that we are members of one another. We are meant to work together using the faith and abilities God has given us so far. We are to be a team. You think too highly of yourself if you think you can worship God by yourself throughout the week. You are part of a team. You are meant to live and work as a team, always mindful of other people's gifts and roles in your life.

God has designed you so that other people are critical to your healing, wholeness and holiness. You are members of one another. Disconnected, you die. Disconnected, you offer disobedient worship; and that is an oxymoron like jumbo shrimp. It is an impossibility.

Brothers and sisters you can not truly worship God in one moment and stop in the next moment, any more than you can truly love a person at one moment and stop in the next. If you truly love with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength, you will surrender you life to worship of God. You will follow the counsel and guidance of His Spirit in embracing forgiveness, in changing your attitude and in teaming with others. You will never be able to turn on and off your worship. Worship of Jesus will be your life theme. Is it now? Do you want it to be?

Then let's begin now. Let's right now present our bodies as living sacrifices. Let's die with Christ now, so we can come up from the grave of death in forgiveness and love.