**Spiritual Disciplines: Worship**

**What do we mean when we talk about worship?**

Worship to the most high God is something to which every Christian, and every created being is called. Yet what we mean by ‘worship’ can take on a range of different meanings depending on context and experience. There are a range of things in the Bible and our Christian lives which we refer to as worship, yet very few are directly labelled as such in the Bible. What do we mean when we talk about worship? How do we right integrate worship into our daily lives? We need a definition which rightly captures what the bible shows us and tells us about worship, and to think through how we live out the lives of worship.

One of the most profound passages on worship in the bible is in John chapter 4. Jesus meets and is talking to a Samaritan woman (something that’s already surprising given the culture of the day). In the conversation the woman recognises Jesus’ wisdom, and so asks Jesus about where people should worship God. Jesus tells her that worship will soon no longer be tied to a particular place – something true for us now. He then goes on to say “*a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.*”

Worship is ‘in Spirit’ and ‘in truth.’

Spirit here surely refers to the Holy Spirit, and according to Jesus there can be no true worship without Him. This means that true worship is super-natural, not something I can offer by myself, but something empowered by the spirit. Naturally each of us tunes and worships ourselves – living for our own desires, comforts, and ambitions. Jesus calls us to change and the Father has sent his spirit to regenerate us, so that we dethrone ourselves and live instead for him as our king. This is what it takes to be a true worshipper, and this is something only possible in the power of the spirit.

We worship in spirit, and secondly, we must worship in truth. Later in the book of John, we hear Jesus say “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me*”. Jesus Christ is thetruth (and not merely ‘a’ truth as our society would like to suggest). He is the only way to the father, because he is the perfect revelation of God, and because he provided the redemption to restore our relationship with God. The beginning of the Christian life lies with God, who by his spirit enables us to understand the truth about Jesus and respond to it with faith and repentance. If we are to continue to worship him properly, we need to continue focussing on the truth about him. Worship never begins with us; it is always a response to the truth. Worship is a response to the truth made possible and empowered by the spirit. Distilling that down, we can say that, worship – true worship – is focussing on, and responding to God. The spirit enables us to focus on and understand the truth, and empowers us to respond rightly to God.

***True worship is focussing on and responding to God.***

**Focussing on God**

Let’s break that down a little and start by thinking about focussing on God. The book of Revelation gives us an insight into a time when we will see God face to face. One thing we see throughout is people and angels and all of creation focussing in worship on specific characteristics of God.

Take Revelation 4 for example. We see the representatives of God’s people before the throne of God, focussing on Him, and they say “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” In that moment of worship before God, they are focussing on a specific characteristic of God: his role as creator and sustainer. By this we don’t just mean that he is very powerful to create (although that is part of it), but that he is a completely different class of being to everything in the world, in the created order; and so eminently worthy of worship from all those things.

Further on in Revelation, in chapter 5, we hear the angels saying “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!” Again their worship is focussed on God – this time on Jesus Christ as the redeeming sacrifice. God is worthy of worship as creator and sustainer; but also as redeemer. He is worthy of worship in his giving of himself to make a way for us to be restored to him; and in the victory over sin and death that he has achieved. Worship here is focussed on God.

In Revelation the worshippers are able to see God face to face, as they stand before his throne. For us, God has revealed himself primarily in scripture; in the Bible. We must ensure that the bible, which contains the revelation of God’s truth and points us to God’s work of redemption, stays right at the heart of our meetings and our own spiritual lives. This sets us up to worship God as he is revealed in the bible, not as we might want him to be. We worship him according to the truth of who he says he is: a God of both mercy and justice, of love and wrath, who both welcomes in heaven and condemns into hell. Worship begins with focussing on the real God, and so we start with the truth about him, and with the help of the spirit, focus on him.

**Responding to God**

Focussing on God is the first part of worship, but what about responding to him? What does it look like to rightly respond to God in worship? Let’s start with a well-known passage from the book of Romans.

*“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform 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)

We see that worship is a response to God’s mercy. In the book of Romans, Paul spends the first 11 chapters focussing on what God has done for sinful human beings. Chapter 12 verse 1 is a great turning point in the letter, where he suddenly turns to his readers and says “God has done so much for you, now live for Him!” That living for Him is a complete offering of ourselves. As we understand God’s mercy to us, it acts as fuel for us to offer our entire lives to him. Paul goes on to explain what that looks like – worship is the transforming and renewing of our minds, so we no longer conform to the pattern of this world. Worship has a transformative effect on *us* even as it is directed to God. We’ll come back to that later.

Revelation again provides a different perspective on worship.

*“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. …And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”* (Revelation 7:9-10)

Here we see a slightly different form of worship. Where Romans called for our entire lives to be worship, Revelation 7 shows a picture of a particular time of worship, where God’s people are gathered, focussing on God. While the entirety of life should be offered in response to God’s mercy, there are times within that where we particularly stop to focus on God, responding in that moment. It’s something for all the church to do, something we can do together, and something that will continue for all time!

Worship is focussing on God as he is revealed in his word, and responding to him in all of life; punctuated by particular times of worship. Worship is focussing on and responding to God.

**Worship is the end of spiritual disciplines**

The activities we usually talk about as ‘spiritual disciplines’ – bible reading and meditation, prayer and fasting, learning – are not ends in themselves. We don’t read the bible for the sake of reading the bible – we read it to see God and hear him speak to us. We read it to focus on God. We read it to worship. Similarly, we pray to focus on God, we fast to focus on God – the end of spiritual disciplines is worship. You can see how each spiritual discipline is part of worship as they draw us to daily focus on God. The spiritual disciplines are not ends in themselves, their ultimate end is worship. Particular worship as we focus on God in them and respond in the moment, and daily as we are transformed by the disciplines and offer our lives as living sacrifices. Worship is the end, the objective, of our spiritual disciplines as they draw us to focus on God.

**Worship is itself a spiritual discipline**

Yet at the same time as worship is the end of spiritual disciplines, worship is itself a spiritual discipline. The primary direction during worship is Christians giving God the praise, honour and glory as we respond to focussing on him, but God in his wisdom has made it so that as we worship he is at work in us. As we focus on and respond to God he speaks to us in the word and transforms us by his spirit. Worship is a key part of growing in Godliness as we take ourselves off the throne and get things turned the right way round; we give God the praise.

God

Christians

Praise, prayer, all of life

Word, Spirit

Spiritual gifts

(Teaching, encouraging, words of wisdom, …)

So as you consider worship as both an end and the means, ask yourself how intentional are you in committing to worship, and cultivating it in your life? Maybe as you read the bible tomorrow morning that looks like engaging in the worship it is. The bible is where God has revealed himself – focus on him in it and respond rightly. Let that continue into your entire day as you live your life in response to the mercy God has shown.

As well as individually, worship is something that happens corporately; as a body. As we worship corporately with other Christians, God is using us to build one another up. We point each other to Christ, helping one another focus on him, and we respond together, encouraging one another.

So why not set aside some time on Saturday night or Sunday afternoon to prepare for the corporate, worship in the Sunday service? Begin focussing on God in the passage you’ll be looking at, take some time to invite God to transform you, consider how you can be encouraging your brothers and sisters during the singing or times of fellowship. If worship is a discipline, it’s something that can be cultivated, so engage with it and consider what it looks like in your life.

**Self-Discipline in Worship**

If worship is a spiritual discipline, it is something in which we must have self-discipline. Worship is not a feeling, a shiver down your spine or something you need to be in the mood for. No, worship is focussing and responding to God. God doesn’t change, so when we focus on him, why should the response to him change?

Now of course there are times when we don’t feel engaged in the worship – we go through ups and downs in our spiritual lives – but the problem there is a loss of focus on God. Sometimes it’s really hard to refocus, but we don’t give up. God is the only one worthy of worship, and so we commit to worshipping him even when we don’t feel like it! Stay committed to bible reading, even when you feel pressured! Be committed to gathering in corporate worship even when you don’t feel like coming to church.

A wonderful thing is that worship leads to more worship. We focus on God, which leads us to respond to him. But then we find as we respond to him that we are captured more and more by his glory and beauty and majesty; and find ourselves focussing on him more. And as we focus, we find more reasons to respond. There’s a cycle there which we can commit to! We were created to worship; the worshippers we see in Revelation – and throughout the Psalms – are worshipping with great joy. As we get things the right way round and give God the glory that is his, worship is a joy. Be committed to worshipping, and be cultivating it! Be focussing on and responding to God.

Focussing on God

Responding to God

Leads to

Fosters