

Worshipping to Please

Exodus 4:4-13; John 8:29-39; Ephesians 1:4-14



Rick Warren reminds us that the term “Worship,” has been so misused as to become meaningless. Our tendency is to focus on our feelings or response to meetings like this, in which we sing, pray, read the Bible, and watch the show unfold. In the same service one may worship while the next goes through the motions. Worship is much more than the rituals and procedures of a service. These trappings are aids, but they are not worship. How can we exchange going through the motions to living lives that are wholly pleasing to God?

Moses wasn't all too sure about God's plans for his life. He had learned a few things over the last generation of his life, and he knew that rescuing an oppressed people was not his cup of tea. He had settled down into a nice comfortable existence, far from the plight of the band of slaves in Egypt. He had taken a shot at helping them, but it had come to nothing. God wanted him back in Egypt, but Moses was having no part of that. Once bitten, twice shy, Moses was through with Egyptian bondage.

The Jews were comfortable with being the descendants of Abraham. They took strength from knowing they could count on God's blessings to their ancestor. They were too comfortable. Jesus called them to a different understanding of the phrase “sons of Abraham.” For Jesus, this term should refer to those who live after Abraham's manner and character. His audience did not enjoy these words. They rose up in indignation at the audacity of Jesus' critique. They spoke louder about being the sons of God. It did not change the character of their actions. They were unwilling to accept Jesus' words. They did not want to bow to the greater sense of obligation Jesus' expected. They were well content with the status quo concept of their position before God. How dare Jesus suggest there was more to worshipping God than their lives displayed?

Paul wrote of being created to fulfill God's will and pleasure. This is no freedom to do our own thing, but a call to live the life of God's servants. For Paul, actions recount the quality and inner reality of our lives. God had a purpose in mind for us. God had an objective for creating humanity. The point is not that we fulfill our own desires and selfish pleasure. The objective is that our lives become wholly pleasing to God.

There are many voices around that would force Paul's words here in Ephesians beyond their clear and certain meaning. Many voices among Southern Baptists today would call us to read Paul's words in a sense of a meticulously predetermined script for our every action. The Greek of the text is less certain about God's design for and knowledge of the future. What it definitively says is that God had a purpose for humanity. Without getting to the details of individual lives and actions, God planned for us to live in fellowship with each other and with God Himself. He knew that we would fall away, and so from the beginning planned for our rescue in Jesus Christ.

Moses was settling for much less than God's will for his life. Left to his own devices, he would have spent the rest of his days caring for his father-in-law's herds. We would find nothing essentially wrong with such a life. It was legal. It was moral. It was ethical, stable, and productive. It provided a respectable living for himself and his family. It was a positive contribution to the society around him. While there was nothing intrinsically evil about this life, Moses had settled for less than God desired.

Moses' life had shifted its focus from the plight of his people to living for his own survival. God wanted him to live in accordance with a larger picture of meaning than the selfish motives of survival. He did not particularly care for God's plans. He struggled against accepting this larger picture, but God would have it no other way. God had a purpose for Moses' life. God had a plan in which Moses should do more than care for his immediate family and personal needs. God wanted Moses to participate in the salvation of a people in bondage. Moses' worship needed to move beyond the bounds of prescribed, ritualistic practice. God wanted Moses to worship with the whole of his life.

It seems that this was the point of Jesus' words about being sons of Abraham. Like the Jews, we must move beyond the cultic definitions that keep us in a state of comfort before God. God desires us to step into the arena of a demanding faith. John sets Jesus' in the context of stepping beyond legalistic faith into redemptive action. For many, worship had become devoid of living up to God's will. Trusting God to enable them to live for redemption and meeting the needs of others had been lost in a religious life. They had reduced worship to repeating prayers and recording attendance. Jesus wanted them to live up to the mantra of his own life—"I always do what pleases God."

That is a much harder goal to achieve. This is a life much more akin to "taking every thought captive"¹ into obedience to Christ. This is not what we normally consider worship, yet this is precisely what Jesus had in mind. This is true worship. This is what worship is really all about.

Sure, we like to sing those hymns of faith that remind us of God's love and the comforts of grace, forgiveness, and peace. We enjoy worship as a corporate expression among friends and family that we somehow belong to God and are recipients of God's grace. We find strength and courage in reading and hearing words of faith amid the chaos of life. We find refuge and renewal in these moments spent together expressly in God's presence. Along with Paul's, Jesus' words remind us, however, that this is not worship. Worship is deeper than these external practices and rituals. True worship is making the whole of our lives pleasing to God. It is focusing our lives on God's pleasure, rather than our own.

Like Moses, we may not necessarily like the reality of God's call upon our lives. Such a reality might intimidate us. As the Jewish leaders in John 8, we don't like to think that our lives are not in sync with God's will. We would rather focus on our benefits from Paul's words than their implications to our daily living. Real worship just seems too demanding. Rather than living to please God, we would rather have God living to please us.

It just doesn't work that way. I was not designed as the center of worship. I was not created as the focus of the universe. The central purpose in worship is living to please God. It is not about me. It is not about routines and rituals. It is not about music and visuals and other trappings of faith. It is placing God at the center of life and pleasing Him with our all. It may make us uncomfortable as we strive to change the focus of living. Spiritual maturity, however, requires moving beyond our comfort to lay our lives at God's disposal. This is the whole point of worship—purposing to please God.

When will our lives begin worshipping to please God? Is that not the point of learning to live in His presence. When shall our lives say with Jesus, "I always do what pleases God." This is worship.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

¹ 2 Corinthians 10:5.