

WORSHIP IS THE SONG WE SING

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Os Guinness observed, “The modern world has scrambled things so badly that today we worship our work, we work at our play, and we play at our worship.”

In this series of messages concerning worship, I have asserted that:

- Worship is fellowship, and worshippers fellowship with God and each other.
- Worship is surrender, and worshippers surrender their will to God.
- Worship is generosity, and worshippers give and share what God has entrusted to them (more than a tithe).
- Worship is serving, and worshippers serve in all their work.

Worship is the most important thing humans do. It is a privilege to worship—more specifically, to be one from whom God accepts worship.

God does not like vain worship (Matthew 15:9), which (in the context) ritualistically continues human traditions; ignorant worship (Acts 17:20–23), which results from not seeking God’s Word on the subject; and will-worship (Colossians 2:23), which offers what we want instead of what He wills.

Worship is the Song We Sing

Today, finally, we come to the most common explanation of worship: Worship is singing, and worshippers sing heartily to the Lord.

Whether chanting, singing acapella, in four-part harmony, or simply humming familiar tunes or spontaneous melodies—vocal music has been a part of the church in every era. Instrumental music in worship, however, has been a part of various controversies. Some groups today believe worship in song should be strictly vocal and they eschew the use of instruments. Their reasons range from the historical (instruments were not used by the Early Church, as they were among some heathen religions) to the theological (God has not commanded, in the New Testament, their use in worship; therefore, it would be a human addition to please ourselves more than Him).

Such controversies will probably never cease. At root, they reveal a conflict between purists (those who think the old ways are, in some sense, more pure and, therefore, more pleasing to God) and communalists (those who seek to embrace and transform any contemporary cultural expression, as far as reasonably possible, into a means of worship). We are not exactly in one camp or the other of these two views; we are firmly rooted in the Biblical revelation of the *spirit* of the Early Church, but are not held captive by ancient historical *expressions* that are not explicitly commended or forbidden in the New Testament.

To be very plain, we seek to build bridges of Biblical value, wherever we can, that incorporate contemporary technologies and familiar cultural expressions, for the worship of God.

In this series, I have been promoting the Biblical spirit of worship—as fellowship, as surrender and sacrifice, as generosity, as service, and as song.

There are three primary elements of the songs that we sing in worship to the Lord: praise, thanksgiving, and rejoicing. We praise God for who He is. We thank God for what He's done. We rejoice in all that God is doing within and among us.

Praise God

Worshippers praise God for who He is.

Getting to know who God really is, what He's really like is the challenge. Not because He's avoiding us (on the contrary), but because we are too lazy. This reminds me of the way my grandsons look for their things when it's time to go home. They glance half-heartedly around the room and then announce, "I don't know where they are." Even if they're standing next to them! They just don't really look. They prefer for someone else to do it for them.

There's really only one way to know God's character, or to get to know Him better: read the Word of God, the Holy Bible—all of it.

Just glancing around in life will reveal nothing. The creation can't show you His character, even if you examine it carefully. It can only show you His powerful nature and strongly suggest His existence through the intricacy and order of the design and function of the created world.

So, I have three questions for you.

1. *What do you read?* What books do you read? Novels? Mysteries? Science fiction? Romances? Comic books? Journals? Magazines? Newspapers?

When do you read the Bible? Devotionals are okay to prime the pump, but a verse or two of Scripture a day is like trying to live on a spoonful of soup a day. It tastes good, but it doesn't last. What you need is more of the Bible, regularly.

If you use a computer, tablet, or smart phone, are you familiar with YouVersion, the Bible App? It's an excellent free resource, offering the Bible's text in most any translation and many languages. Not only can you read the text, but the app will read the text to you from many translations! It offers dozens of reading plans to choose from (whole Bible, just the New Testament, just the Psalms, etc.) that will automatically bookmark your place when you close the app and return to it the next time you open the app (even if you reopen it on a different device!). It has so much more to offer. We really have no good excuse for not reading the Word regularly.

2. *Why do you read?* As a pastor, I've been warned from the start not to read the Bible just to get my next sermon. I often do get inspiration for sermons in the course of regular Bible reading, but that's not why I read it. I read it to get to know God better, and to know what He's asking of me. Why do you read it?

Joshua 1:8 Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do.

If you also read the Bible to get to know God more and succeed in your life, start with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit, who authored the text, to teach it to you, and show you how to apply it in your life. "Holy Spirit, teach me. And change me."

3. *How do you read it?*

Luke 10:25 One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?"

What is your takeaway? Always read for a takeaway. Ask yourself, "What is my takeaway today? What stood out to me? What piqued my interest?" Whatever it was, write it down (anywhere). On your phone, on a napkin, on a scrap of paper. Even if you lose it or never go back to it, the very act of writing it, especially by hand, will impress the thought in your heart and mind. Of course, you could take that paper with you and make that verse or thought your memory work for the day.

Thank God

Worshippers thank God for what He has done. What has God done for you AND for others? He deserves your thanks.

Remember Romans 1!

Romans 1:21 Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused.

God revealed Himself to people through His creation, but most of them were not thankful; they just took Him for granted. Don't let that be you, because it's a slippery slope spiritually, leading to spiritual darkness and confusion.

I cannot overemphasize how basic and necessary gratitude is to keeping in step with the Holy Spirit. It's one of the fundamental disciplines of a spiritually full life. Do it readily. Do it often. Do it generously. If you're thanking God, you can never overdo it.

How and when can you practice thanksgiving? Because it builds up your faith. And it the best way to encourage yourself when circumstances threaten to get you down.

Thanksgiving increases your sense of God's love and care, at all times and in all circumstances. I give God thanks, even when things seem coincidental, because I believe He holds sovereign control over our lives. Coincidences are really God-incidences.

Rejoice in God

Rejoicing is not contrived. And it is not measured. It is a spontaneous and immediate response to God's activity.

Matthew 18:2 Jesus called a little child to Him and put the child among them. ³ Then He said, "I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven.

That's a sobering thought: you will never get into heaven unless you become like a little child in your relationship with God. And rejoicing is a childlike recognition of and response to life.

Think about it: How do children rejoice? They clap. They raise their hands. They skip. They dance. They sing. You do the same!

Music and Song

All three of these—praise, thanksgiving, and rejoicing—are elements of our worship in music and song.

The lyrics remind us of God's Word (or they should).

The melody and instruments inspire our gratitude.

The rhythm and harmony express our joy.

Some people are reluctant to sing out, because they compare their voice to Andrea Bocelli or Josh Groban or Celine Dion or Lauren Daigle and conclude, "I can't sing."

Do you know why some people become superstars? Because they are super! They have gifts that are beyond the rest of us. And there are not many of them in the world. That's why we celebrate them.

Nevertheless, God has commanded us to sing. And if you have a voice at all, you can sing. Even if you have no voice, or cannot raise it where you are, you can sing from the heart in silence, or hum, or whistle, or clap your hands.

Psalm 96:1 Sing a new song to the Lord!

Let the whole earth sing to the Lord!

² Sing to the Lord; praise His name.

Each day proclaim the good news that He saves.

Psalm 149:1 Praise the Lord!

Sing to the Lord a new song.

Sing His praises in the assembly of the faithful.

Do you sing to yourself in the shower, or while doing chores, or while driving in the car? Most people do. I'd like you to think of our church gatherings as our "collective shower," where we (keep our clothes on and) share a refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

Do you remember the experience in our old sanctuary space, how sounds were so thoroughly absorbed that it seemed like you were the only one in the room who was singing? How intimidating! Compare that to the sound in this room! The acoustics were designed to reflect the congregations voices, so wherever you are, even on the stage, everyone can be heard. It's so rich!

When you get the chance, sing with all your heart! Because God asks for it, and He loves it.

The relevant question is not, "Do you have a voice?" but "Do you have a song?" I had a song when I was a child, but I lost it along life's way. When I met Jesus Christ, he restored my emotions and gave me a song. I had to sing! I found my old guitar and began to play again. God loves to hear His children sing.

Some churches seem to think that God is their worship director, the worship team are the performers, and the congregation is the audience. I think that's completely backwards! I want you to think of our worship gatherings this way: The worship team are the directors, the congregation are the performers, and the Lord Jesus Christ is the audience. Let's do our utmost for Him!

Anything else diverges from a Biblical perspective, and leads to all sorts of ungodly tensions.

So, don't try to imitate or compare yourself with anyone else; just help to make the room sound full!

For worship is singing, and worshippers sing heartily to God.

So, our final definition reads:

Worship is our FELLOWSHIP—fellowship with God and His people—demonstrated by an attitude of SURRENDER to God and acceptance of people, and a lifestyle of sacrificial and faithful SERVICE, expressed by generously GIVING Him our thanks, our time, our talents, and our treasure, through the opportunities of WORK that He provides for us, all the while joyously PRAISING Him with music and song.