

The True Worship of God

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—John 4:23*

THE NARRATIVE FROM

which our opening text is taken furnishes many valuable lessons in connection with our subject, and it is well that we consider it carefully. Our Lord was on his way from Judea to his homeland, Galilee, and had to pass, therefore, through the region

of Samaria. When he reached Samaria and came to the city of Sychar, he became wearied and in need of refreshment from the arduous journey northward. In the ordinary method of counting time in those days, it would appear to have been around mid-day when he reached this point.—John 4:1-6

While Jesus' disciples went into the city to obtain food, as the account shows, a woman of the city of Sychar in Samaria came out to get her customary supply of water, and there at the well of Jacob she came upon the Master resting. He asked her for a drink, but she hesitated and inquired, “How is it

that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.” (vss.7-9) At that time, the Jews considered Samaritans heathen and outcasts; therefore, for Jesus to ask a favor of a Samaritan was out of the ordinary in the general course of life.

Our Lord thereupon suggested that he had “living water,” and rather than her providing him a drink, she might more appropriately ask him for this “gift of God,” as Jesus called it. A question presented itself to her mind, so she asked Jesus what sort of a person would presume to be greater than their father Jacob, who originally had ownership of this well and gave it to his progeny. Jesus explained that anyone who drank from Jacob’s well would thirst again, but “whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst,” to which the woman replied, “Sir, give me of this water, that I thirst not.”—vss. 10-15

As our Lord’s conversation with the Samaritan woman continued, she perceived that he was a prophet. Thereupon she raised the question of the proper place and method of worship. She said, “Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.” No doubt she was aware of the formalism and traditions which had attached to the worship of the Jews. She may have felt that the simple worship of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was more effective and had divine approval, as well as the more ceremonial worship of the Jews at Jerusalem, which had been established at a later date.—vss. 19,20

It is thought by Bible historians that it was upon this very site that the Samaritan temple was built at the foot of Mount Gerizim. If such was the case, the attitude of this woman toward the proper place for worshiping God, “in this mountain,” seemed but natural. Jesus, however, did not agree with her and indicated in no uncertain terms that true worship of God must come through a specific pathway. Jesus said, “Believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. ... But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.”—John 4:21,23

Our Lord did not subscribe to the commonly accepted thought that any religion and worship is better than none, and that all forms of worship have their respective merits. Rather, he gave unmistakable testimony to the fact that there was only one proper and suitable form of worship that henceforth would be recognized by God—“in spirit and in truth.” He did not say that there had been no true worshipers before, but none of those who had worshiped the Father prior to the time of Jesus could possibly be said to worship him “in spirit and in truth.” This is because up to that time, none had been begotten by God’s Holy Spirit. None, therefore, had had the light of truth to a sufficient degree to fully worship God as implied in the words of the Master to this woman of Samaria.

WORSHIP “IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH”

In order to understand what is meant by the worship of God “in spirit and in truth,” it is essential,

first of all, to have clearly in mind the meaning of worship. In Old Testament times, the meaning of the Hebrew word, *shachah*, translated “worship,” was to prostrate oneself, to bow in obeisance. In the New Testament, the Greek word is *proskuneo* and means much the same thing as the Hebrew word. However, this is only the outward method of recognition of that which is superior or which merits devotion, esteem and honor. It is merely the way the ancients had of acknowledging a greater power or being, and if sincerely done, it was representative of their inmost feelings and sentiments. In other words, it represented their attitude. It will be recalled that it was this form of outward worship that Cornelius manifested toward Peter when the apostle brought to him the words of life and promptly rebuked as improper when offered to him as a servant of God. Such obeisance is only properly offered to God himself. John on the Isle of Patmos offered this same prostrate worship to the angel of the Lord who brought the Revelation to him, which the angel also rebuked, reminding John that only God was to be thus worshiped.—Acts 10:24-26; Rev. 22:8,9

The definition of the word “worship” as given in dictionaries today includes the following: To engage in an act of worship or have feelings of worship; to honor or adore; to pay homage; to show reverence, as in prayer and praise; the attitude of deference or respect; ardent admiration. From these meanings of the word “worship,” we see that it covers a wide variety of thoughts, attitudes and actions.

Based on the foregoing, anything to which a high degree of admiration can be attached is “worship” in the same sense of the word, whether it be of a

religious character or not. The thought of our time has been to separate the religious from the purely secular and to consider them two completely separate and distinct fields. However, with the Jew this distinction was not as clearly drawn as it is today.

It will be recalled of those chosen to perform the work of constructing the Tabernacle, and who had been trained in their respective arts, that not only did they have the necessary natural qualifications for the work in hand, but additionally, they were filled "with the Spirit of God in wisdom and understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship." (Exod. 31:1-11; 35:30-35) Similarly, those who have been called of the Father in this present Gospel Age are given this same Spirit of God, only that its action and operation are in a different manner and for a different purpose. However, the same sense of consecration and devotion to the divine service is to be rendered.—Isa. 11:1-4; Col. 1:9-13; Rom. 14:8; Col. 3:17; I Peter 4:11

This thought of complete surrender to the loving influence of God in every aspect of life is rarely understood or appreciated by the majority of professed Christians. If this fact were clearly seen, what a difference it would make in the fabric of world society today. Even the activities in normal everyday walk of life would have a different meaning than they now have. No longer would it be said that "business is business," and "religion is religion;" but business, and all other facets of life, would be conducted religiously, conscientiously, and benevolently as they should always be conducted.

One day, and we trust that it may be soon, the whole world will recognize the true meaning of worship.

Then the principles of Christ will be in full operation and no longer will the great Adversary be permitted to confuse the minds of the people upon all these questions of such great eternal importance.

Worship in spirit and in truth does not apply simply to acts of prayer, praise, supplication and thanksgiving. It goes deeper than all these and takes hold upon the affections and upon the heart. Hence, it signifies not an “act” of worship but rather a “life” of worship. Those who through the begetting of the Spirit and the knowledge of the divine plan, have become so in harmony with God and with his law and all the features of his loving purposes, will find themselves, in the words of our Lord, delighting to do the Father’s will.—Ps. 40:8

This is worship in spirit and in truth. It will find its expression in personal prayer and in a humble and reverential demeanor in approaching God. It will be further manifest in all the acts and words of life. The captivated heart will seek to bring every ability and talent into complete subjection to the will of God and of Christ. No less than this is the worship which God seeks. Surely, only those who are fully devoted to the Lord in heart, and who serve him in Spirit and in truth, are in the full sense the true worshipers whom the Lord desires: the “little flock,” the faithful “royal priesthood.”—Luke 12:32; I Pet. 2:9

FURTHER LESSONS FROM THE NARRATIVE

When the woman of Samaria perceived that Jesus had a message of such great import for her, she called attention to the promise of God to send a Messiah, and that he would tell them all things. This showed that although considered an outcast

from the covenants of promise by the Jews, she had a keen sense of values and appreciated the words of promise. The Master then did something that he had done only once before during his earthly ministry. Here in Samaria where the interests of the kingdom of God were thought to be little esteemed, he made a statement of the greatest importance. Answering the woman's statement, Jesus said: "I that speak unto thee am he."—John 4:25,26

Here in this supposedly ungodly country, Jesus acknowledged to this Samaritan woman the fact that he was the Messiah sent of God. It is true that he acknowledged his identity to the disciples, but never did he come out with a similar statement to the Jews in general except to the blind man, the record of which is found in John, chapter 9. Had he done this among the Jews, immediately he would have been branded as an impostor and a blasphemer. In fact, this is just what the scribes and Pharisees hoped to charge him with—blasphemy. It will be recalled that this man, blind from his birth, was healed by Jesus on the Sabbath day. This gave occasion to the scribes and Pharisees to declare him a lawbreaker on this account—that is, they wished to discredit the miracle and indicate that our Lord was just a sinner like everybody else. They went to the blind man's parents to influence them to deny that a miracle had been performed by Jesus. While the parents readily stated that their son had in fact been blind from his birth, they were unwilling to acknowledge that it was Jesus who had healed him for fear of being cast out of the synagogue.

The parents turned the matter over to their son to make a statement himself. While the son was not sure of our Lord's identity as the Messiah, he did not deny the fact that he had worked a miracle in his interest, thereby attaching himself to, what was in the Jews' eyes, the name of infamy—Jesus of Nazareth. The healed son's statement to the Pharisees is worthy of note in this connection: "Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth." How much of truth this man had! In fact, he entirely confounded these learned men by his statements, and they could do nothing against him, so they "cast him out" from their presence. While the religious leaders of the Jews cast him out as unworthy of their recognition, Jesus thereupon disclosed to the man that he was the Messiah, and told him his purpose in coming to Earth.—vss. 23-41

Returning to the account of the woman of Samaria, the effect of what Jesus said to her was electrifying. Leaving her water pitcher at the well, she rushed into the city to tell her friends and neighbors of the Messiah. They went out to learn for themselves. When they, too, were convinced, they insisted that he remain with them, and he abode with them two days. (John 4:28-44) Another point of interest in this narrative is the fact that when the disciples returned from their mission to the city and found this Samaritan woman in the company of the Lord, they did not question him about it. (vss. 8,27) This was evidently because they had sufficient confidence in their Master that they knew there must be some good reason for his conversing with her.

HINDRANCES TO TRUE WORSHIP

One of the main hindrances to the proper worship of God is the acceptance of the “commandments” or “traditions” of men, which often manifests itself in false doctrine. How much of persecution and suffering might have been avoided had the powerful influence of false theology not been permitted to interfere with the proper understanding of God’s character and plan for the salvation of mankind. Only the truth fully and clearly discloses the purpose and character of God. In addressing the scribes and Pharisees, our Lord characterized them as hypocrites in their superficial and formalistic attitude toward the true worship of God. He said: “Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”—Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:7-9

The majority of those addressed with the above words, it seems, were outwardly very pious. They fasted and prayed much, and for a pretense made long prayers in the streets; but theirs was not true and acceptable worship. Therefore, they were not prepared to be introduced at Pentecost to the begetting of the Spirit and thus to become worshipers in Spirit and in truth. Our Lord shows one important hindrance to their acceptance as worshipers; namely, false doctrines, based on human traditions and commandments, instead of the pure teachings of God’s Word. Similarly, all down through this Gospel Age many have been hindered from proper development as true worshipers of God, in Spirit

and in truth. They have been impeded by the same baneful influences of false doctrines, human creeds, and traditions of men accepted and held to instead of the pure Word of God, the true bread which comes down from heaven.—John 6:32

Another hindrance to the proper worship of God is the excessive admiration that some have had for organizations, man-made institutions, religious councils, and influential individuals. In I Thessalonians 5:12,13, the Apostle Paul says: “We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake.” However, this loving esteem for, and confidence in, the servants of the Lord should never go to the extreme that sees them as perfect or incapable of error.

No servant, no matter how effective or beneficial his service may prove to be, should ever be so excessively admired that other servants of the Lord are considered as being of little or no value. Neither should anyone presuppose that all the light and truth that God has at his disposal for the interests of his people are committed to one sole group or individual. Only the perfect Son of God, Christ Jesus, is worthy of that distinction. No true servant of God would make any such unwarranted assertion. Nothing should take the place of God in our reverence and admiration, adoration and praise. To whatever extent this fact is lost sight of, to that same degree there is a likelihood of the loss of spiritual insight and discernment. Let none of God’s people be found to be “creature-worshippers” instead of “God worshipers.”

In Colossians 2:18,19, Paul writes: "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels [messengers], intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, And not holding the Head, from which all the body by, joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God."

This beguiling of the flock away from Jesus, the only true shepherd, to follow a fellow sheep, is not always the fault of the leaders. There seems to be a general tendency on the part of all who have the true, humble sheep nature to follow one another. (John 10:1-5; Heb. 13:7,17,24) It is a cautionary lesson, therefore, for all to learn—that each sheep recognize as leaders only such as are found in full accord with the voice and spirit of Christ, the Chief Shepherd, and that each member of the flock see to it that they eat only "clean provender" and drink only the pure water of truth as directed by the Shepherd.—Isa. 30:24; Ezek. 34:17-19

This implies the exercise of the individual conscience of each member of Christ's flock on matters of doctrine and practice. It also tends to keep each one in sympathy and fellowship with the Shepherd, who knows each member of the flock and "calleth his own sheep by name." (John 10:3) The same intimate relationship of the individual Christian with the Lord is illustrated in the figure of Christ, the Head, and the church as members of his body.—I Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:15,16

Many servants of God have been variously used to some extent, by the grace of God, in the ministry of the Gospel. Thus, it is not out of place to say that

while all servants of the Lord should appreciate the love, sympathy, confidence, and fellowship of fellow servants and of the entire household of faith, none should desire homage or reverence. Neither should any wish that others follow them as a special leader or put them above other servants of the Lord. We are all followers of Jesus, our Shepherd. “One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.” (Matt. 23:8) Therefore, the name “Christian” is quite sufficient to designate all the spiritual sons of God, the true brethren of our Lord.

None of us, as consecrated members of the “body of Christ,” should esteem our own interpretations of the many details of truth as being on a par with clear statements of Scripture. The most we should be able to claim is, in humility and sincerity of heart, that our understanding is what we believe to be in harmony with the divine Word and with the spirit of the Truth. Each of us, as students of the Bible, should seek to prove all things by the Scriptures, accepting what we see to be thus approved, and rejecting all else. (Acts 17:11; I Thess. 5:21) Thus, may we be considered as true worshipers of God, both in Spirit and in truth, always building one another up in our “most holy faith.”—Jude 1:20 ■

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