

Worship Is an End in Itself

by John Piper

Worship is an end in itself, and should never be pursued as a means to achieving something other than worship.

Scripture: Psalm 5:7, Psalm 29:2, Psalm 32:11, Psalm 42:1, Psalm 42:5, Psalm 51:17, Psalm 100:4, Matthew 15:8

Topics: "True Worship", "Honoring God"

Description

John Piper preaches about the essence of worship, emphasizing that worship should be pursued as an end in itself, not as a means to achieve something else. He reflects on the importance of honoring God with genuine feelings and emotions, highlighting that worship involves reflecting back to God the honor and glory due to Him. Piper explains that true worship is the quickening of the heart with appropriate emotions in response to God's greatness, and it should not be manufactured as a means to another experience. He concludes by urging the congregation to prepare their hearts to meet God in worship, emphasizing the significance of genuine worship as an end in itself.

Transcript

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Matthew 15:8-9

WORSHIP IS AN END IN ITSELF I want to try this morning to create a consciousness in our church that worship is an end in itself. I want us to have this conviction: that worship should never be pursued as a means to achieving something other than worship. Worship is never a step on our way up to any other experience. It is not a door through which we pass to get anywhere. It is the end point, the goal.

I remember one night in my room in Saint Hall at Wheaton College my senior year. I was struggling with what should motivate me to try to win people to Christ. I asked myself "What's the goal of winning people to faith in Christ?" And I answered, uncomfortably, "So that they can help win others." But then I translated that purpose into an actual witnessing experience. Suppose a person asks me: "Why do you want me to become a Christian?" And I say, "So you can win others." Won't a thoughtful person look at me and say, "Well now, that's strange. You mean the goal of your religion is to recruit people to recruit other people to recruit other people on and on? Where's the substance? Where's the content?" I remember how miserable I felt as I realized how empty and mechanical my life with Christ had become. I could never have suggested such an empty answer to "Why evangelize?" if my own life or worship had been a real end in itself. Of course the purpose for winning people to Christ is not that they might win others. It's that they

might bring honor to God in worship and that they might experience the joy of trusting God's mercy. We do not recruit people to recruit others. We recruit people for God! The content, the substance, the life, the goal, the end is God and the joyful experience of ascribing glory to him. Evangelism is not an end in itself. Worship is an end in itself.

From that point on, all my thinking about the church revolved around the uniqueness of worship. Of all the activities in the church, only one is an end in itself: worship. Horizontal fellowship among believers is not an end in itself. Fellowship in scripture is considered to be very largely for the purpose of encouraging faith and stirring up love: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another all the more as you see the Day drawing near." It is right to seek fellowship specifically with the aim of being encouraged in faith and stirred up to love. But even though a genuine experience of worship can produce those same results (of stronger faith and zeal to love), yet the genuineness and authenticity of our worship is threatened if we treat it as a means to some other experience.

So fellowship is not an end in itself, and the same can be said of all other ministries in the church. Christian education is not an end in itself, because knowing is not an end in itself. We seek to know God so that we might be moved to hope in God. The aim of Christian education is stated in Psalm 78:5-7: "God established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children so that they should set their hope in God ..." The Bible does not present knowledge for its own sake, but rather for the kindling of faith and hope in God. As Romans 15:4 says, "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scripture we might have hope." Education is not an end in itself.

Nor is financial stewardship an end in itself. We would be very upset if our money were ceremonially burned after the collection. We expect it to be a means to the sending of missionaries, the care of the distressed, the preservation of our meeting place. And so on, down the line, the same point could be made about all the things we do as believers. They are not ends in themselves. Only worship is an end in itself. Only worship should not be done as a means to achieving something other than itself.

But now a question arises. Are not the communion of saints in fellowship and the dissemination of Christian knowledge in preaching and the giving of tithes and offerings--are not all these parts of our worship services? How can you say that none of these is an end in itself and yet have them as integral parts of our worship which is an end in itself? That's a good question, and to answer it we need to examine now what worship is. We will begin with the morning text, Matthew 15:8, 9.

Jesus quotes from Isaiah 29:13 in order to express the root problem with the Pharisees' way of life. "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." The first thing I want us to see from these two verses is that the parallel between "this people honors me" in verse 8 and "they worship me" in verse 9 shows that at the essence of all worship is the act of honoring God. That does not mean making God honorable. We don't improve upon God in the least when we worship him. Honoring God means recognizing his honor, feeling the worth of it and ascribing it to him in all the ways appropriate to his character. "Honor and majesty are before him, strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength! Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name (Ps. 96:6-8). That is the first thing I want us to see: that worship involves an act of reflecting back to God in praise the glories emanating from

his presence.

The second thing I want us to see in Matthew 15: 8, 9 is that worship can be thought of in two different ways. When God says, "In vain do they worship me" or, "with their lips they honor me," he implies that worship can be thought of as a series of acts or words that are performed in obedience to Biblical commands or liturgical tradition. Worship throughout Biblical history always involved action. The main word for worship in Biblical Hebrew means "to bow down." Worship was performed in bowing, lifting the hands, kneeling, singing, praying, reciting scripture, etc. All this can be called worship. But all this can also be done when the heart is far from God.

We all know this sort of experience in our ordinary life. One man retires from the firm loved by all, respected by his colleagues, admired by the junior executives. When the party is given to honor him everyone knows that the hand shakes, and speeches and congratulations and gold watch are sincere. They come from the heart. But then a few years later old Grumble-Full retires and out of duty the party is given with the same handshakes and speeches and gold watch, but everyone knows this time that honor was paid with the lips but the heart was far away. Or haven't you sat through a school talent show and observed how some applause comes from internal appreciation, but other applause comes from external expectation.

Those two different experiences correspond to two different senses in which we use the word "worship." The one is a series of activities performed by the body and mind. The other is an experience of the heart which may or may not find outward expression. It seems clear to me that when the Bible commands us to worship, it is not commanding us to honor God with our lips while our heart is far from him. When David says, "Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name, worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Psalm 29:2), and when Jesus says, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve (Matt. 4:10), and when the angel says to John in Revelation 19:10, "Don't worship me; worship God," we can be sure that they did not mean perform liturgical acts regardless of your heart's condition. In those commands worship refers to an experience of the heart that is anything but far from God. This is the second meaning of worship implied in our text and this is the worship I have in mind when I say worship is an end in itself.

Now what is this experience of the heart like? We've seen already that it is more than action; it is more than kneeling and praying and singing and sitting and reciting scripture and eating the Lord's Supper. But it is also more than willing. Genuine worship is never a mere act of will-power. All those activities of worship require the exertion of our will. But they do not become genuine worship by virtue of that. When God says, "Their heart is far from me," he does not mean they don't have the will power to go through the motions. Sure they do. But their heart is still far away from God. The reason is that the drawing near of the heart to God means the coming alive of our feelings for God. Worship is an affair of the heart. It is an affair of feeling and of emotion.

I feel right now in an almost impossible pastoral position. What I want to say can be so easily categorized and dispensed with as emotionalism on the one hand or dead decency on the other, depending on your personality and experience. We live in a peculiar time. On the one hand, fascination with feelings is rampant. Psychology is the science of our era. Book after book helps us analyze our emotions and cope with their ups and downs. On the other hand, there is a widespread suspicion of emotion and embarrassment about expressing feelings, especially in the mainline churches (like ours). In response to this situation I want to say first that genuine worship is based on the mind's perception of historical and Biblical truth. It has solid intellectual content. It is not the frenzied emotional product of manipulation or

gimmickry. But that is not our problem. We are not in danger of emotionalism. Far from it. Our problem--and not ours only, but the problem of our Conference and of most evangelicals nationwide--is that we do not realize that there is no genuine worship where feelings for God are not quickened. There is not true worship where the heart is far from God. But the heart's approach to God happens in the quickening of our feelings for God. Therefore, where feelings are dead, so is worship.

Now let's be specific. What are these feelings that make the outward acts of worship authentic? What are the feelings toward God that turn learned forms into genuine worship? For a sampling of the extraordinary rich emotional responses in worship, we do best to look into the world's richest book of worship, the book of Psalms. Some of the highest worship begins with the feeling of brokenness and contrition and grief for sin. "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51:17). "I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin" (Psalm 38:18). Mingled with the feeling of genuine contrition is the feeling of longing or desire. "As a hart longs for the flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Ps. 42:1,2). Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Psalm 73:25, 26). Also mingled with our sense of sin and our longing for his mercy is the feeling of fear and awe before the holiness and magnitude of God. "I will worship toward thy holy temple in the fear of thee" (Psalm 5:7). "Let all the earth fear the Lord, let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him" (Psalm 33:8). And as he approaches, forgiving all our iniquity, crowning us with honor, satisfying us with good (Ps. 103:3-5), our hearts well up with the feeling of gratitude. "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him, and bless his name!" (Ps. 100:4). And mingled with our gratitude are the feelings of joy and hope. "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice and shout for joy all you upright in heart" (Ps. 32:11). "Why are you downcast, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God" (Ps. 42:5). These are examples of some of the feelings that come from God and move us to God in genuine worship: contrition, sorrow, longing, desire, fear, awe, gratitude, joy, hope. When these feelings are quickened, the heart is no longer far from God. Worship is no longer lip-service. It is genuine and authentic.

And now perhaps, coming full circle, it is clearer why I must say true worship is an end in itself. If that which turns habitual forms into true worship is the quickening of these feelings in the heart, then true worship cannot be performed as a means to some other experience. Feelings are not like that. Genuine feelings cannot be manufactured as stepping stones to something else. If the telephone rings and the voice on the other end says, "Johnny, this is Bob, good buddy; your mother and dad were in a serious bus accident. Your mom didn't make it and your dad is hurt bad," you don't sit down and say, "Now to what end shall I feel grief? What can I accomplish if I cry for the next half-hour?" The feeling of grief is an end in itself. It is not performed as a means to anything.

If you have been floating on a raft without water for three days after a shipwreck on the sea, and there appears a speck of land on the horizon, you don't say, "Now to what end shall I feel desire for that land? Even though the longing in your heart may give you the power to get there, you do not perform longing in order to get there. The longing sweeps into you from the value of the water that is on that land. Even though longing is always for something we do not yet have, nevertheless it is not an artificial concoction of the will; it is not planned and performed as a means to getting what we desire. It rises spontaneously in the heart and as a feeling is an end in itself.

If you are camping in the Boundary Waters and awaken to the sound of snorting outside your tent, and then see in the moonlight the silhouette of a huge bear coming toward your tent, you do not say, "Now to what end shall I feel fear?" You do not calculate the good ends to which fear can be a means and then perform the act to accomplish those ends. When you stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon and watch the setting sun send the darkness down through the geological layers of time, you don't say, "Now to what end shall I feel awe before this beauty?" It is an end in itself. When a little child on Christmas morning opens his first gift and finds his "most favoritest" rocket he has wanted for months, he does not think, "Now to what end shall I feel happy and thankful?" And when that little boy enters kindergarten and starts getting picked on by some second graders, but then his big third-grade brother comes over and stands beside him, he doesn't decide to have confidence and hope swell up in his heart. They just do. They are not an act performed as a means to some other end. And so it is with all genuine emotion (i.e. emotion springing from appropriate causes) and therefore, all true worship. 'Worship is an end in itself; because God is the voice on the phone. God is the island on the horizon. God is the bear. God is the setting sun. God is the "most favoritest" rocket. God is the big brother.

And now to go back and pick up our earlier question: if fellowship, preaching and giving of offerings are not ends in themselves, why are they integral parts of our worship service, since worship is an end in itself? The answer is this: what makes a worship service authentic and genuine and pleasing to God is the quickening of our hearts with appropriate emotions. But this quickening does not happen in a vacuum. On the one side, it is caused by true perceptions of God's manifold glories. And so there must be substantial theological content in the service: in the lyrics of our hymns, in the prayers, in the scripture, the sermon. And right here is where the communion of the saints plays a crucial role. A heart-quickenning truth may be heard from a hymn but perceived with power when seen in the face of a sister or a brother across the room. So on the one side, there are elements of a worship service which are necessary in order to help the heart perceive the life-quickenning reality of God. On the other side, the heart quickened with feeling for God must often express itself. And, therefore, our worship service must include vehicles of that expression: opportunities to give, sing, recite, pray and probably a good bit more that we have never tried.

In conclusion, by way of summary, Jesus said, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." Therefore, even though worship can refer to a form of activity in which the heart is distant, yet true worship which delights God is the drawing near of the heart to God, or, to put it another way, the quickening of the heart with genuine feelings in response to God's glory. Such feelings are never performances of will power calculated to accomplish other ends. They are ends in themselves. Therefore, since they constitute the heart of genuine worship, worship is an end in itself. And our Sunday morning service is unique in its focus on God who is greatly honored in such worship. And it is for his name's sake that I ask you all very earnestly to take time Saturday night and Sunday morning to prepare yourselves to meet him here, praying with the psalmist, "Open my eyes that I might behold wondrous things in your word (Ps. 119:18). And: "Unite my heart to fear thy name" (Ps. 86:11).

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