

True and Spiritual Worship

by Paul van Engelenhoven

This sermon emphasizes the importance of true spiritual worship, highlighting the dangers of idolatry and the necessity of being filled with the Holy Spirit to worship God in spirit and truth. It explores the transformation that occurs when we come to Christ by faith, seeking to know and love God genuinely, rather than creating idols to fit our desires.

Scripture: John 4:23, Isaiah 40:18, 2 Corinthians 3:17, John 3:5, Romans 1:22, Exodus 32:4

Topics: "True Worship", "Idolatry and Transformation"

Description

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Transcript

Let us open up God's holy word. I'll be reading to you from the gospel of John, chapter four, the verses 19 to 24. If you look in your bulletin, you will see the passage Isaiah 40 as well, but we'll read that in the middle of our sermon tonight.

So keep that text within reach, but let us now fix our attention on the gospel of John, chapter four, the verses 18, I'm sorry, 19 to 24. This is the living word of the living God. This is Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman, and this is how the text goes.

The woman said to him, sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship. Jesus said to her, woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the father.

You worship what you do not know. We worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews, but the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the father in spirit and truth. For the father is seeking such people to worship him.

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. Let us pray. Heavenly father, we pray, Lord, as you have given these words to us tonight to meditate, to receive food from heaven, we pray that you would strengthen us and fill us, oh Lord, with your spirit, for we pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right, we have arrived at Lord's Day 35. I'll read to you the questions 96 to 98, and as you will see, tonight is about worship. Question 96 goes as follows.

What is God's will for us in the second commandment? Answer, that we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his word. Question 97, may we then not make any image at all? Answer, God cannot and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Although creatures may be portrayed, yet God forbids making or having such images if one's intention is to worship them or to serve God through them.

Question 98, but may not images be permitted in the churches as teaching aids for the unlearned? No, we shouldn't try to be wiser than God. He wants his people instructed by the living preaching of his word, not by idols that cannot even talk. So far the catechism reading for tonight.

Dearly beloved, I think one of the greatest tragedies in our day is a great poverty in the knowledge of God. We have more books, more Bibles, and more sermons that we could ever want, and yet there is an incredible shortage in the knowledge of God. Now, I don't mean if we could number or name the attributes of God or his works or even quote scripture.

What I mean is a true spiritual knowledge, that which the Old Testament calls a fear of the Lord and the New Testament calls a fear of the Lord and a fellowship in the Holy Spirit. The overwhelming sense in our hearts of the grandeur of God, the awesome experience of the nearness of God, of walking with God, not only in great manifestations of sorts, but that peaceful walk with God that causes us to turn away from sin and turn to worship the living God. There seems to be a great interest growing every day in knowing about God more than knowing God, walking with him, and yet the only way we can rightly worship God is if we know God, if we spend time in his presence, if we have wrestled and agonized in his nearness, if we have come to him as the clay and he has been to us the potter, a nearness to God that makes us genuinely fear him and love him, that joyful walk with the living God.

The only way to worship God is through a true spiritual knowledge of him, a Holy Spirit-filled worship through which we no longer worship God for our fleshly benefit, but a worship in God in which we worship him for who he is. That is the worship that God seeks, and ever since the fall, mankind has always sought to worship gods or God or himself or something in the world. There is an innate need in our hearts to adore something, to live for something or someone, and so throughout history, if you dig in the earth almost anywhere in the world, you will find little statues where people used to bow for or little wooden carvings of gods that were depicted, images or idols or man-made gods, but through all of it, there was no satisfying worship.

Gods were exchanged for better gods, and then a greater myth was written for a greater god who was above that god, and then there were different nations who have their gods fighting each other, and then when a nation would lose, they'd realize that their gods are not strong enough, and all throughout history, mankind has been trying to find an image they could worship, a god they could follow. Well, in the midst of this dark humanness seeking after God, the voice of God speaks to a Samaritan woman. Out of all the people you could find, not the priest of some great temple, not even the high priest in Israel, not the great kings of the earth, not the emperor of Rome at this time, but God speaks to a woman who is part of the cast-out people of Israel, the Samaritans who were half-Jewish and half-non-Jewish, a mixed kind of people that were despised by the people of God, and among these people, she was cast out.

She was one who's had many husbands and was now staying with a man. This woman, out of all the people in the world, hears from God how God is seeking to be worshiped. This is what it says in verse 22 of John four.

"You worship what you do not know. "We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. "But the hour is coming and is now here "when the true worshipers will worship the Father "in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking "such people to worship Him.

"God is spirit, and those who worship Him "must worship Him in spirit and in truth." God is revealing to this woman here, this sinful woman, by all accounts of the people of her time, God is speaking to this woman and is revealing to her that God is seeking. His eyes go to and fro the earth. His eyes go all around the world to find worshipers who worship Him in spirit and in truth.

Not in a certain location. Not on this mountain or that mountain. It's not physical.

It's not a statue or an image. It's not visible. It cannot be organized.

It cannot be turned on and it cannot be turned off. The worship that God is seeking is a worship that is spiritual, spiritual worship. Everything else, what Jesus is laying out here, everything else is false worship.

Only this kind of worship is true worship. Now tonight I want to look with you and dive into this because I could tell you tonight, and be very quickly done at Lord's Day 35, don't worship images, don't have images about God and don't bow down to them or don't consider them as God or that it looks like God. But all I would do is tell you what not to do.

But how do we worship God? Because you cannot have a physical statue in your mind and yet in your mind and heart, you can think that God is like Santa Claus or God is a God of all love or on the other hand that God is a God of all judgment and in your heart you have a worship to a God that might not be the scriptural God at all. And so the only way to truly follow the second commandment is not just to worship no images but to worship the true and living God the way God has called us to worship him. And so we will begin with this idea of idolatry and then we'll slowly move to worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

Let's begin with the fleshly desire for idols. What I mean by fleshly desire is simply human beings as we are born, we wanna worship something we can see, something we can feel, something we can touch. There is a great desire in our hearts to be able to see a picture of God.

Think about the golden calf of Aaron. Israel had just been saved by God with mighty plagues. Can you imagine this was our generation? That God would take us out of Egypt by 10 plagues and it wouldn't touch the Israelites but it would touch all the Egyptians.

We were just liberated from the most powerful country in the world that was enslaving us and we've been led through a desert and being fed by manna that comes from heaven that lies around the field every morning. And when we need water, our leader Moses speaks or hits the rock and water comes gushing out. And now we see this great mountain where we're resting around, we're in front of Mount Sinai.

We see Moses go up and we see thunder and lightning and a great display of glory upon the mountain. But then it takes two days, takes three days, takes five days and so on. And after a while, we start to realize, well, now we're just stuck in the desert.

Who knows what happened to Moses? Maybe Moses was the one who did it all, but where's God now? We don't see him, we don't know him. Maybe God has left us in the desert and now we're just stuck here. What we need to do is we need to gather around to create a God that we can see.

And so this is what it reads. So sorry, Aaron collects all the gold and then the way he describes it is he puts the gold in the fire and out comes this calf. He places it in the center of the people.

And then he says this in Exodus 32, verse four and five, these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.

This golden calf is now the Lord. You see what's happened? The nation was scattering, they were wondering what would happen to Moses, but now everybody's happy because there's a golden calf, something they could see, something they could handle, something they could envision. They didn't want this invisible God because they couldn't see it.

They couldn't know it. But now they have a golden calf and everybody's happy and getting drunk and eating and feasting and it's a great time. Aaron wasn't changing gods.

You see that? He says, this is a feast to the Lord. He didn't change gods. Aaron didn't go from the living God to the gods of the Egyptians.

What he did is he changed the glory of the invisible God for images made of men. It said in his mind, the God that he worshiped with Moses was now changed into this calf in front of him because the people didn't want an invisible God. They wanted something they could see.

How about Dagon of Ashdod? Do you remember the God or idol Dagon of Ashdod, the Philistines? What did the people do? They brought and make this great big statue and then the Philistines had war with the Israelites and what happened is the Philistines won and they got the Ark of the Covenant and they thought, now we can show that our God is stronger than their God and so they brought the Ark before the temple and they brought it into the temple of Dagon of Ashdod and what happened? Dagon fell on his face and broke off his arms. They thought, well, we gotta try a second round. So they put him back up and he fell again and then they realized, we gotta get this Ark out of here because our God is not doing so well when this Ark of God is nearby.

Do you see the insanity here? What they should have done is throw the statue away and go to Israel and ask, who is this God of yours that destroys the statue of our God? But no, that's not what they did. What they did was this. We wanna keep our God, get this God, the living God out of here.

We wanna protect the God we have. We don't wanna know this God that can break down our God. We want a God that we can manipulate, we can control, we can bring offerings to him when we want to and then if we don't need anything, we just go back and let him catch dust until we get a bad crop again and then we'll bring some food to him again to please him.

You say, well, we don't have a statue here. We don't have a statue in our hearts. I don't want a statue.

I don't wanna put a golden calf in front. I don't want any of this. And yet in the flesh, we want a God we could see.

We want a God like Dagon that you can go to when you need something and if you don't want something, you just pull away and just let it be. We want a God that we can manipulate to make us, to bless us when we want to and when we're fully blessed, we don't want God to be nearby. We don't want a God that tells us what to do and what not to do.

We want a God that we can control and image. Now, this is the problem of the flesh, of the heart. We wanna create a God that we can control in our minds, in our hearts.

We can be devoted to him as much as we want and when we wanna have some time for ourselves, we walk in our own way. Well, that's idolatry. Romans 1, 22 to 23 says this.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. In other words, they took the glory of God who created the heavens and the earth and they lowered him to be like us, to be our servant. Can I ask you a question tonight? How about us? Do we have a God that we control or is it a God who is our Lord? I don't mean, are we full-blown idolatry? Do we have an image? No, no, nothing of that.

But if we're truly honest, do we control our God or does he control our hearts and our lives? You see, I think no matter how spiritual we are, there is always a tendency to keep God out of the door, out of certain places of our heart. Well, I'll worship God here and I'll clean my life in this places but I'm gonna keep a corner of my heart where God is not gonna enter and I'm gonna keep that for myself. That's idolatry.

Because what you're doing is you are recreating God in the way you want him to be. I think there's a lot of idolatry on Sunday mornings. It's been said by some that Sunday mornings are the highlight of idolatry in the world.

For although people declared themselves to worship the biblical God, they've actually exchanged him for something they want him to be. They've taken God out of the way and have replaced the living God with a God who they want. A God who blesses them with wealth or health but doesn't ask them to live holy and separate lives.

So what is the problem with idols? Why can we not create our own gods? Why can we not just make images or worship God really sincerely through images? We read in our catechism that can we not use pictures as physical aids? This comes from the idea that the people couldn't read in past time and so what they would do is they put pictures around the church or the cathedrals so that people could see a picture of God and that would help them to worship God. Why can we not make a God in our own mind, in our own heart? Well, Isaiah 40 tells us, doesn't it? Listen to this. Isaiah 40, verse 18 to 25.

To whom then will you liken God or what likeness compare with him? An idol, a craftsman cast it and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for its silver changed. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot. He seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move.

Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told to you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. He who brings princes to nothing and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness, scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth when he blows on them and they wither and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me that I

should be like him? Says the Holy One.

Isn't that glorious? The text is simple, isn't it? Here is a guy who takes a tree. He carves it on the one side and he carves it on the other side and he makes it into a statue. And then he makes it very impressive, perhaps with a very wise looking face or a very muscular body.

He's a strong and a wise God. And then before the tree that he cut in the morning, he goes on his knees and he bows down and he says, you are my God, you have brought me into life and you will protect me. How foolish.

Then Isaiah tells us that the living God is not something that you create, that you form and that you control. The living God is one who takes princes out of their thrones. In other words, this is not something you control.

The living God controls the earth. He moves in your life. He does whatever he want with your life and in your life.

This is a God who is the almighty God who holds all things in his hands and does whatsoever he pleases. If he wants you to be poor, he will allow you to be poor because he has some purpose in your life to make you poor. If he wants you to be rich, he lets you be rich, but he has some purpose in your riches for his glory.

This is the living God. It is for his glory that you were created. Every image ever made is made for man's good, but the living God has created a creation for his glory.

Let us be very careful with whom we worship as we make an idol in our heart, as we make an idol of God. Take some parts of God, and it's popular today, isn't it? The God of love. We read in the Bible, God is love, and so we've created an idol that is only love.

Doesn't matter whether you get drunk all the time or whether you are on drugs or whether you watch pornography or whether you beat up your children or whether you cheat on your wife. It doesn't matter because God is a God of love, and all you have to do is just say, shouldn't have done that. That's not a God of the Bible.

The God of the Bible says, as whom he loves, he disciplines. He rules over his people to make them holy. We've created a God in this land that says God is a God of love, but he is not just, he is not righteous, and he's not holy.

But we can do it on the other hand, which is prominent here. You can create a God who is only just, only holy, only righteous, but not loving. And you can say, well, he is a frightening God, and you cannot come to him.

And Jesus died for sinners, but you cannot come if you come, it's presumptuous. We've changed the word of God. That's another idol.

It's not the God of Scripture. Every time you take the word of God and you close it and you put it to the side and you form a God in your own mind, whether he is strict or loving, patient or impatient, or whatever he is, if he's not the God of Scripture, he's an idol. Paul said in his time, there were many Jesuses, many messiahs, but there was only one true Jesus.

There are many gods that are preached in many churches today, but there is only one true and living God. He is the God who speaks through all 66 books of the Bible. And if we insert anything or take anything away from him, we have created ourselves an idol and we're no longer following the God of Scripture.

So how are we gonna worship the true and living God? Does it mean we have to memorize the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, perfectly follow it? Because every time if we for one moment move to the left or move to the right, we're worshiping an idol. How can anyone worship the true and living God? If idolatry is everything that is not exactly according to Scripture, how can any of us worship God? What would your answer be? What if you think you're worshiping God, but you miss one point? Well, the Bible tells us, doesn't it? In our mind and in our strength, in our flesh, it is impossible. Because our heart by nature is bent towards idolatry.

That's why the Israelites kept falling into trouble. Most of them were not spiritually alive and so their flesh left them away from God. And all of us are born by nature that way.

We worship a wrong God. We can be instructed and taught all day long to say the right things, but in our heart, we desire a God that's not the God of Scripture. So how do we worship him? Well, this brings me to my third point, the worshipers God seeks.

Jesus tells us that true worship is spiritual worship. In other words, we need the Holy Spirit to worship. Any kind of worship that is not led by the Holy Spirit is idolatry.

If you try to worship God without the Holy Spirit, I guarantee you, you will not worship the God of Scripture. Because only through the Spirit in us, we can see him, know him, love him, and worship him. And so when Jesus says, but the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such persons to worship him.

God is spirit and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. What Jesus is saying is this, you need to have a supernatural relationship with God to worship him. Every day, if you want to wake up and worship God, you need the power of the Holy Spirit to worship.

That's different, isn't it? I think many times we think the Holy Spirit brings us to the gospel and then we kind of walk along throughout our lives and then one day the Holy Spirit glorifies us and sends us to heaven. But Jesus says, the only way you can worship him is if you're filled with the Holy Spirit and see the glory of God and by that spirit, you can worship him. So what is this worship in spirit and in truth? Doesn't every church say it's spiritual? Doesn't every religion in the world say it's spiritual? What is spiritual worship? What Jesus is talking about here is not spirituality, but worship through the Holy Spirit.

In other words, the Holy Spirit entering you, enabling you, opening the eyes of your heart and giving glory to God. D.A. Carson defines it this way. I'll read it slowly.

The worshipers whom God seeks worship him out of the fullness of the supernatural life they enjoy. They worship God out of the fullness of the supernatural life they enjoy. And on the basis of God's incarnate self-expression that is Christ Jesus, on him, based on him, through whom God's person and will are seen, or as Carson says, finally and ultimately disclosed, they worship.

In other words, by the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the gospel, our eyes are opened to see Jesus Christ, to see the glory of God, and in that way, we worship him. And then he says these two characteristics form one matrix, indivisible. In other words, the way we can truly worship God is through

the Holy Spirit, being filled with the Holy Spirit and following the true path of worship, Jesus Christ.

It's supernatural. Every part of the Christian life is supernatural. The Bible tells us, when Paul often writes, when he says pray, he says pray in the Holy Spirit.

In other words, pray by the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within you. And so, the way the Bible describes this is in Ezekiel 36, for example, before we were spiritually dead, or Ephesians 2, if you like, we were spiritually dead, and so we cannot worship a spiritual God because all we want is earthy, physical, and visible. But then when we come to life, we receive a spiritual sight and we love the things that are spiritual.

In other words, we love God by the Holy Spirit. Suddenly, we love Christ even though we've never seen him. We don't have a picture in our head what he looks like, and yet we love him.

We don't have a picture in our mind of God, and yet we love God. We wanna see his glory even though we don't have an image in our head. What is that? Spiritual truth, spiritual revelation, a longing for God from the Holy Spirit.

Well, the Gospel of John explains this, right? John 3, 5, and 6, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and can only worship in a fleshly way.

That is, it can only excite the human emotions through sight, maybe through meditation, but that's all. But God is calling those to himself who worship him from the spirit, who have become spiritually alive, a love for God from the heart of hearts. If we have not received the Holy Spirit, we cannot see God, we cannot know God, and we cannot love God, and so we cannot worship God.

Now, if we come to Jesus by faith, we can worship God. Listen to this, on the last day of the feast, on the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. "Whoever believes in me, as the scripture is said, "out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." Now, it is this he said about the spirit, "with whom those who believed in him were to receive, "for as yet the spirit had not been given "because Jesus was not yet glorified." What Jesus is saying is this, if you come to me, you will receive the Holy Spirit inside of you, and it will cause you to worship the true and living God.

You will worship him spiritually, not by what you see, not by what you hear, but by the spiritual revelation of God to your soul. And so you read God's word, and you can see it. It's alive, it's real.

Now, you might say, I've done that, I've been saved, and yet I'm still not filled with the spirit. There's a love of God in my heart towards God. I love him, I know what you're talking about, that there is a love in me for God, and yet I wish it was more fully.

I still find myself at times giving to a fleshly way of worship, where I just want a God created to fit my needs. Sometimes I realize I'm worshiping a fleshly way, and I'm making idols, and I'm not always worshiping God in spirit and in truth. Well, does that mean that you don't worship God? I don't think so.

I think the way we worship God by the spirit increases the more we come to Christ. We don't come to him once, but we keep seeing him more and more, and the more we walk with Jesus Christ, the more we are filled with the spirit, and the more we worship him day by day. Second Corinthians 3, 17 to 18.

Now the Lord is the spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there's freedom, freedom to worship and live. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, who is the spirit. So true spiritual worship is this.

You come as a sinner to the Lord Jesus Christ, and you say, Lord, I'm dead in my sins. Make me alive based upon what Christ has done for me. When you do that, faith by faith, you are transformed.

You begin to see and love God, but that's not all. Then you keep coming to him by faith, through the scriptures and through the worship and preaching of God's word. You come to him week after week, day after day.

You come to Christ, and you call out to him, and you search him more and more. And every time you do that, you're more filled with the Holy Spirit, and you're more transformed into the image of Christ. In other words, you'll worship him more and more and more.

And so, this is a whole journey, to simply say this. The only way we can prevent worshiping idols is by coming to Christ by faith every day. Every day, every moment of the day, we pursue Christ, seeking his glory, because that is the only way we can worship God and not turn God into an idol.

And what we will find, if we follow the Lord Jesus Christ, it is a God who is more working and transforming our life than us asking him for temporary blessings. It becomes, it goes away from the God, you need to give us the manna, and it turns into the God, you need to give me transformation. I wanna be more holy, I wanna be more loving, I wanna be more like you.

That's spiritual worship. Now it's no longer, what can God do for me? But now it becomes, God, how can I be more like you in your love, in your patience, in your kindness, in your gentleness, in your purity? You see the difference? Idolatry worship is always, what can I get out of God for me? Spiritual worship is, how can I please God? That's what the spirit does. It's free, it's pure, isn't it? Do you taste the purity? I remember the days when I sought to create a God for myself, it was a selfish pursuit, because I was going even to the Bible, and I was looking for passages of what God could do for me.

But my heart was black and dead, because it was an idol I was creating. I was taking parts of God and formed them into a golden calf, and I say, this is my God. When we come honestly to God, we realize that those things that we think we want are only glorious when we become the servants of Christ, and that he is our God above us and not below us.

Spiritual worship, what do you long for? Do you long to know God and walk with God, and do you want God to change you, or do you want to change God? Why do you come on Sunday? Are you trying to find elements you want to fit in to your idol, or do you come to submit under God's word and meet the living God? I hope you come for the second. See, when we open the word, whether it's here or at home or wherever, we come face-to-face with the living God, and you know what, it's frightening, because he's always cutting in to our hearts, cutting into our flesh. He's changing us, but you know what he's cutting out of our hearts and our lives? The cancer of sin and death.

And he shapes us, and he forms us, and he molds us as a potter does the clay. So we don't create our own gods, but every time we come to Christ, we are changed. We are transformed.

And so when we gather, whether it's here or in private, make sure that we always come to be changed by God rather than changing God, for that is how we worship God, in spirit and in truth. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come before you tonight, and Lord, we pray that you would mold us, shape us, and transform us.

No more idols, no more false idea about who you are. But to truly come naked before you, that you can transform us, and change us, and shape us to be more like Christ every day. Father, we pray that you help us, fill us with the Holy Spirit.

Kill, mortify the deeds of the body. Mortify the flesh. Lord, we pray that our idols, the idols of our hearts, would all be removed to simply follow you and love you from now on until the day we see you face to face.

For Father, we pray all of this in Jesus' name, amen.

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