

ACCEPTABLE INDIVIDUAL WORSHIP

Lesson 4

Worship of God as Spirit

John 4:19-24

What we believe about God will affect how we worship God. Our worship of God will never rise above our concepts of God. If we are defective in our understanding of God, then we will also be deficient in our worship of God.

The word “God” is a term that people frequently use but seldom define; therefore, they have some vague, fuzzy or warped concept of God. Einstein thought of God as “a pure mathematical mind.” Tillich declared God to be “the ground of Being.” Others see God as a superhuman person or an impersonal force. Still others think of God as “a bully in the sky” or “a celestial policeman” or even worse “a sentimental grandfather sitting in the clouds, stroking his beard.”

A Christian must always take his definition of God from the inspired Bible, which is a revelation from God about God. Since God is, it is our duty to know all we can about Him. God’s existence and nature do not depend upon what men *think* about him, for He is all that He is no matter what men think. The only true God is the God of Scripture. Because God has revealed Himself to us in the Bible, we have no need or the option of conjuring up ideas and images of God by our own imagination.

The Samaritan woman at the well obviously had some very wrong concepts about God that made it impossible for her to render acceptable worship to God. In His evangelization of this woman, Christ sought to give her a right understanding of God that she might worship God correctly after she became a follower of Christ. This woman thought of worship in terms of a place. She localized God in her thinking to a temple whether it was on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria or on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem. In her own mind, God was limited to a piece of geography and contained within a particular location. Therefore, Christ corrected her false thinking by pointing out that with His coming worship would not be connected with any physical temple anywhere but that worship would be “in spirit and in truth.”

“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . . Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:20-21,23-24).

The revelation that Christ made to this woman concerning the person of God was that “God is Spirit.” She had to clearly understand that God is Spirit in order to break her false concepts of God. Literally this says, “The God is Spirit.” God is not a spirit as though He were one of many. God is in essence, substance and being Spirit. This

woman's acceptable worship of God was directly dependent upon her understanding of the spiritual nature of God. The Greek text puts the word 'Spirit' first in the sentence in order to stress the Spirit aspect of God.

The revelation that God is Spirit is a truth that Presbyterians have taught their children so they could worship God correctly. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* says, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." (Question and Answer 4)

GOD MUST NOT BE MATERIALIZED

In the words "God is Spirit" we understand that God can have no physical body or human parts. He is not of any corporeal substance; therefore, He has no physical limitations, as do humans. Since God is Spirit, He is never to be materialized, for the Second Commandment strictly forbids any physical representation of God. **"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. . ."** (Exo. 20:4-5). Any man-made physical representation of God or mental materializing of God is a willful breaking of God's command.

The Samaritan woman had associated God with the temple at Mt. Gerizim. She undoubtedly believed that when a person finds his deity, a temple should be erected to this deity whereby a person comes to worship, offer sacrifices and go through certain rituals to please this deity. Perhaps this woman associated God with a temple to such a degree that she could not separate the two in her thinking. She became guilty of materializing God in her mind so as to make Him like a human who must be in one place at one time. She was most certainly guilty of a form of idolatry.

It is perfectly natural for men to humanize and materialize their deities because they have no real understanding that God is Spirit. This is why God said to wicked Israel, **"To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?"** (Isa. 40:18) and **"You thought I was altogether like you"** (Psa. 50:21). God is never like a man in substance or essence, for He has no human body. Why? God is Spirit.

The epistles of the New Testament also confirm the fact that God is invisible, for a Spirit cannot be seen. It is said of Christ that **"He is the image of the invisible God"** (Col. 1:15) and in a burst of praise it is said, **"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17).** "Wait," you say, "If God has no body, then why in the Bible are there references to God having 'hands' (Exo. 3:20), 'arms' (Exo. 6:6), 'ears' (Isa. 37:17) and 'eyes' (Psa. 34:15)?" These are figures of speech to be understood metaphorically. When we speak of the "hand of God" or the "nostrils of God" we are using anthropomorphisms. Anthropomorphisms are using human expressions to describe God though we know they are not literally true because we have the revelation that God is Spirit. (John 4:24).

GOD MUST NOT BE LOCALIZED

The Samaritan woman tried to localize God; that is, she thought of God as being contained in one place that was the temple. Christ revealed to this woman that God is Spirit so she would know that God is everywhere, not just in a particular location like a temple.

God is Spirit teaches the omnipresence of God; that is, God is everywhere present because only a being that is spirit can be everywhere at once. God is boundless and limitless. God is over all things, under all things and outside of all things. Only God can be ten billion places and more at once because He is Spirit. God is too vast, too immense to be contained in one place. God fills the heavens and the earth.

“Am I only a God nearby,’ declares the LORD, ‘and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the Lord” (Jer. 23:23-24).

God as Spirit is an immanent God. God’s presence and power pervade His entire creation. He does not stand apart from the world as a mere spectator of the things He has made. As Spirit, God is everywhere present in His creation. God is and God is both here and there. This is also true in relation to God’s creation of man. God is present near him, next to him, and this God sees man and knows him through and through. It is because God is Spirit that every man has existence, **“For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).**

God is not so immanent, however, that He is indistinguishable from the universe. This would be Pantheism, which states that God is all and that all is God; that God is in everything. Hindus, who are Pantheists, are said to tap on trees and stones and whisper, “Are you there? Are you there?” to the god they hope might reside within. What we mean as Christians by immanence is that God as Spirit has universal presence. A.W. Tozer says,

“He (God) is there as He is here and everywhere, not confined to tree or stone, but free in the universe, near to everything, next to everyone, and through Jesus Christ immediately accessible to every loving heart. The doctrine of the divine omnipresence decides this forever.”(*Worship: The Missing Jewel*)

For Christians, the immanence of God is blessed truth, for we are always, immediately in His presence. God sees, He hears, He acts immediately everywhere in the universe. Christian’s cannot escape God’s Spirit.

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast” (Psa. 139:7-10).

Because we know God is Spirit, we can offer acceptable worship by being conscious of the presence of God. We can practice the presence of God who is already here. God's presence with us never leaves and He is closer to us than our very thoughts. Only God can be with every Christian at once, comfort every Christian at once and answer every Christian's prayer at once. Why? God is Spirit and an awareness of this fact should cause a deep sense of worship to come over us as God's people.

GOD MUST NOT BE DEPERSONALIZED

Some scoffers have concluded that if God is Spirit He must be an impersonal God with no personality, for a spirit cannot be a person. God as the Eternal Spirit does have a personality. A person is a being to whom the pronouns "I," "you" and "he" can be meaningfully applied, and a person must have self-consciousness and self-determination. One of the names of God is "I AM." This name was revealed to Moses when he was to go back and speak to the Children of Israel to lead them out of bondage in Egypt. Moses said to God that when he went to the people and the people wanted to know what was the name of the God who sent him. God said, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God is stating that He exists as a self-conscious, self-determining personal Spirit. God is a person with a sovereign will, a perfect mind and a complete emotional make-up. He is a person!

For the Samaritan woman at the well, she had no personal God. She had some very limited understanding of God but it was a God of her own imagination. Whatever concepts she had of God, whatever religious understanding she had, and whatever external worship she rendered to her concept of God, this God did not change her life. She was an immoral woman who had five husbands and was presently living with a man who was not her husband (John 4:17,18). Her concept of God was depersonalized so that it had absolutely no effect upon the way she lived. Worship to her was an external exercise that had absolutely no effect upon the way she conducted her daily life. She, in her mind, had localized God in one spot, the temple. She could do as she pleased as long as she was not where God was. Whenever men lose the concept that God is Spirit and everywhere present, they will go down hill into moral degeneration, for God will become depersonalized to the point where one thinks he can isolate himself from God.

God is a person that cannot be localized or confined. Because God is a person, He can be known in a personal way. God is a personal God with whom men can talk, whom they can trust, who enters into their experiences, who helps them in their difficulties and who fills their hearts with joy and gladness. This personal God, who is Spirit, has been revealed in Christ and we can know this God intimately. **"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3).** God has promised to all those who trust Christ, **"I will be their God, and they will be My people" (Jer. 31:33).** Those who know God as a personal Spirit know Him vitally and intimately and their God changes their lives and they worship Him from the heart.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The truth that God is Spirit has some very profound implications in the area of worship. Perhaps more confusion has come into worship because of a wrong understanding of the spirituality of God than for any other reason.

God Does Not Dwell in Buildings. God is not confined to special places or special structures. God obviously can be worshipped anywhere because He is everywhere. The Scriptures are clear that God does not dwell in man-made temples. **“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands” (Acts 17:24).** God is not so interested in where He is worshipped as much as how He is worshipped. Since the first advent of Christ, God is finished with temples and buildings as houses for God. God is not primarily interested in the structure of church buildings or even the beauty of them. These things may appeal to the aesthetic side of man but not to God. Even structures in the Old Testament did not house God completely. This is not to say that God does not love beauty. Both the tabernacle and temple were beautiful structures, but in the New Testament age the emphasis is not placed on buildings, but on Christians who are the temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

“This is what the LORD says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?’ declares the LORD” (Isa. 66:1).

Remember a church building is not a holy sanctuary. The holy sanctuary was in the tabernacle and the temple and these were types that pointed forward to Christ who would come as the Messiah. The tabernacle is destroyed; the temple is demolished. A church building is a building. The building is to be respected and may be quite beautiful, but there is nothing holy about it. God is concerned about who worships and how we worship and not so much where we worship. We can worship at home, in bed, in school, in the shower, on the job and even in church.

God is Primarily Worshipped by Faith. God is Spirit and He must be communicated with and worshipped by spiritual means. The God who is Spirit is known only by faith. We contact the true God in Christ by means of the Bible through faith. **“We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).** This does not mean that God does not use the whole man (body, soul, heart, mind) to worship Him. God can use the five senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste) as physical means to move the emotions to worship Him spiritually. However, these five senses are to be used as the Bible itself prescribes. While there is no strict dichotomy between the spiritual and physical, the New Testament places the emphasis on the spiritual side of worship, not the physical.

Do not misunderstand. Emotions are not to be eliminated from worship. God does want us to feel, experience and enjoy Him. However, man’s emotions are moved because he first comes into contact with God who is Spirit through the spiritual means of faith.

When Christians contact the God of Scripture through faith, then they get a proper, balanced Christian experience. The whole man (body, soul, heart and mind) will worship God (Matt. 22:37).

Emotions can fool us sometimes. We can be deceived into thinking we are worshipping God when we are not. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics and some Protestants all have external forms of worship that appeal to the five senses, moving the emotions, but this is not necessarily worship unless it is done according to the rules and principles of the Bible. If the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Bible and faith cannot bring Christians true worshipful experiences, then surely no unbiblical liturgical ritual, excited feelings or pumped up emotions can do it. Acceptable worship must involve the whole man as the worshipper seeks to exalt the Triune God biblically.