

# Preparing Yourself for Worship

by Albert N. Martin

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What I will attempt to do is simply to give a very brief exposition of several lines of our Lord's thought in this passage and then apply it in some very practical ways relative to the whole subject of preparation for the worship of God. You'll remember the setting of John 4. Our Lord is talking with this immoral woman who is one of those sheep that He has determined to gather to Himself. He went out of His way geographically. He went out of His way in terms of His own personal inclinations. He was weary. The last thing in the world, humanly speaking, that He would want to do at that time was to engage in ministry to another needy soul. But here He is ministering to this woman. And in the course of His conversation with her, He makes this very profound statement in verses 21 to 24 of John 4:

"Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe Me, the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father. Ye worship that which ye know not [speaking to her as a Samaritan]: we [that is, identifying Himself with the Jewish nation] worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be His worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Now this whole play on words ("spirit," "truth," "you worship on this mountain; our fathers worship in Jerusalem") forms the framework of the entire thrust of our Lord's message to this woman concerning the whole subject of worship. The Samaritans worshipped in their own temple. They worshipped a God whose mind and character they felt was significantly and sufficiently revealed in the Pentateuch. They did not accept the entire Old Testament. So there was great ignorance in their worship. On the other hand, the Jews embraced the entire revelation of the Old Testament. They worshipped at the right place (Jerusalem), in the right surroundings (in the temple) with the right framework of worship (the sacrificial system, etc.). But according to our Lord Himself, their worship had been stripped of its spiritual element. You remember in Mark 7, He said, "You draw to Me with your lips, but your hearts are far from Me." So what our Lord is emphasizing is this: where Samaritan worship was characterized by ignorance, the worshippers whom the Father seeks must worship Him in the realm of truth. They must worship Him in terms of the totality of the revelation He's made of Himself. And on the other hand, where the Jew felt as long as he was at Jerusalem, at the right place, at the right time, doing the right things, God was pleased, He says, "No, the Father seeks people to worship Him not only in the realm of truth, but to worship Him in spirit," which can either be a reference to the energizing power of the Spirit, or spirit as synonymous with internal heart worship opposed to mere external, carnal worship.

So true worshippers, those worshippers that the Father is in a quest to have, must present to Him a worship that is characterized by the realm of truth and by the reality of its spiritual nature. And anything else is an abomination unto God. And if you want one of the most searching statements concerning abominable worship that can be

carried on in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing externally, just read Isaiah 1. For in Isaiah 1, God says--and I'm paraphrasing--"I'm sick and tired of your Sunday morning worship services. I'm sick and tired of your doxologies, your offerings, your benedictions, your calls to worship. I could vomit out the whole business." That's what He says to His people in Isaiah 1. They were in the right place (the temple in Jerusalem), at the right time, doing the right things, but the heart and the soul had gone out of their worship. And again, I remind you that this is exactly what our Lord says to the Jews of His day in Mark 7: "In vain do you worship Me because you draw near with your lips and not with your hearts." So there should be a tremendous concern in the heart of every Christian to know whether or not he is rendering the kind of worship that the Father seeks.

To make it even more contemporary, in about 45 minutes, we will enter in what is called the Sunday morning worship service. Now what should be your greatest concern as you anticipate entering that service of worship? What should be your greatest concern as you sit in the building that we call the sanctuary? You see, your greatest concern should be to render the kind of worship that the Father Himself is seeking. What kind is He seeking? Well, our Lord tells us in verse 23. He is seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. And that positive declaration infers the negative. He does not want worship that is characterized by ignorance or by heartlessness. He wants worship in the realm of truth, worship in the reality of the spirit. Now if we're to bring that kind of worship to God, what is necessary on our part? And I would like to divide the thoughts that I'll share in the remaining 20 minutes into a time sequence. There are things necessary to render this kind of worship before we actually engage in worship during the acts of worship and then subsequent to the experience of worship. So we have before, during, and after.

First of all, then, what is necessary if we are to worship God in spirit and in truth before we ever enter the place of worship, before we ever enter that situation, whether it's a formal church building, or whether it's a fellowship hall, whatever it may be? Let me suggest something that's very, very mundane but very, very necessary. Before you worship, there must be the preparation of your body for the acts of worship by adequate rest. You see, you don't worship God as the angels do. They worship as disembodied spirits. The Scripture says the angels are sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation. Angels can go all Saturday night on the bidding of their God and still worship Him fresh on Sunday morning. But you're not an angel. You say, "Nobody knows that more than I do." Well, I'm not speaking in those terms. But I'm talking in terms of our humanity. You must worship God in that body He has given you. And that body is so tied in with the activities of the spirit and of the mind that a body inadequately rested cannot give itself to true worship. So the battle for worship many times is won or lost Saturday night. This is one reason why in our congregation we have no Saturday night church activities. Now we don't go around like some kind of spiritual Gestapo checking up on everybody to see if they're all in bed by 9:30 Saturday night, because there are times when we as elders wouldn't be a good example. That's the one night we can get together weekly as elders to pray for the congregation. Sometimes the needs keep us up late, but we feel that's not presumptuous because those later hours are matters of engagement in the work of Christ. But apart from that, you must learn to discipline your Saturday nights if you're to win the victory of worship Sunday morning. That's where the battle's won or lost. And perhaps some of you have unwittingly fallen into this subtle trap of getting yourself all disturbed that your heart seems so cold and your mind so unresponsive, and you are looking for deep and profound spiritual reasons as to the sluggishness of

your worship on the Lord's Day, when your basic problem was that you simply did not cut things off Saturday night, get home, get your full 8 or 9 hours, whatever you need, come fresh to the Lord's Day, allowing enough time to prepare your heart, and come with a rested body and a fresh mind to engage yourself in the worship of God. So before worship, if we're to render worship in spirit as well as in truth, you must prepare your body by adequate rest.

Secondly, you must prepare your mind and heart by serious, lofty thoughts of the God whom you're going to worship. Not only prepare you body by adequate rest, but prepare your mind and heart by serious, lofty thoughts of the greatness of that God to whom you're going to come in your acts of worship. If you get to bed at adequate time Saturday night, then there will be time to allot at least a half an hour each Lord's Day morning to sit quietly and ask yourself the question, "When I gather with God's people to lift up my voice and my heart with their voices and their hearts in worship of God, who is this God to whom we come?" Meditate on such passages as Isaiah 40. Fill your mind with those lofty thoughts of God that Isaiah so eloquently pens in the 40th chapter of his prophecy: the God who before nations are like grasshoppers, the God before whom all the nations of the earth as like the drop of a bucket, the God who takes up the entire earth as a little dust in the palm of His hand. Think serious, lofty thoughts of the greatness of God. Read some of the Psalms that speak of His greatness. Fill your mind with them, such as Psalms 94, 95, 97 ("The Lord reigneth. Let the earth tremble"), thoughts of God that will expand and stretch the mind.

But not only must you fill your mind and heart with serious, lofty thoughts of the greatness of God, but prepare your mind and heart by warm thoughts of the goodness and mercy of God. Read the 103rd psalm: "Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me. Bless the LORD, O my soul, forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy desire with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle."

Read the first chapter of Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." Fill your mind and heart not only with the lofty thoughts of the greatness of God so that there is something of awe in your worship, but fill your mind with thoughts of His goodness and His mercy, that your heart may run out to Him in hymns of praise and psalms of adoration that flow from your present awareness of this God and His goodness to you. If you don't, as it were, prime the pump, if you don't build the fires of devotion before coming to worship, it's awfully hard to set the wood and the kindling in the fireplace and strike the match to it all at once simply when you're singing the first hymn. That first hymn should be, as it were, the opening up of the backlog of previous pressure. You fill your mind and heart with great thoughts of God with thoughts of His goodness so when that first hymn is sung, there is the pouring out of the built up pressure of the heart and mind concerning the greatness and the majesty and the goodness of God.

Then there are certain things that we must engage in during our acts of worship if our worship is to be characterized by spirit and by truth. Adequate rest helps us to worship God, in terms of spirit, to give our entire inner being to worship. Thinking about God's greatness and goodness prepares us to worship Him in truth. We're worshipping Him in terms of who He is and what He's done. Now during worship, what must be done to worship Him in spirit and in truth?

Number one--and everything else flows out from this: give yourself wholeheartedly to the various aspects of worship. "Yourself" means your body, your mind, the entirety of your being. Let's take them. Singing psalms and hymns of praise to God. That this is an integral part of worship is clearly taught both by the Old and the New Testaments. Take the 100th psalm: "Come before His presence with singing...Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise." Now how are we to praise Him? Well, David gives us the example. He said, "With my whole heart will I praise Thee." Now if something has your heart, it has everything else. I love to watch a few football games when I get a chance, particularly during the fall. Once you get involved in body contact sports, I guess it never gets out of your system. And the wholeheartedness of the enthusiasm, particularly when you watch some of these games that come over WABC, such as Mississippi playing Tennessee or something else where there are these tremendous rivalries. And you see the camera zeroing in on the cheerleaders. They don't care what kind of donkeys they make of themselves. Grown people who ought know better, carrying on like a bunch of kids. And when their team loses, they're not ashamed to weep, I don't care how reserved they are. And the camera will zoom in on the pretty young cheerleaders sitting there crying away. It will zero in on some defensive tackle, 6'6" and 270 pounds, sitting on the bench crying. Why? No shame of tears, no shame of enthusiasm because that in which they are engaged has their heart. And if it's got the heart, it's got everything else. Should God be thought worthy of anything less than this?

One of the curses of our Western culture as it touches the religious life is that it's somehow given us the idea that we can get enthusiastically abandoned to anything, but when we touch spiritual things, somehow we must be very proper. Well, that's not the mentality of the Bible. When David got so blessed at the return of the ark, he danced for joy before the ark. And his wife saw him and was embarrassed about the whole thing. And he said, "If you think this is bad, I'll dance yet more vehemently in joy before by God." The Scripture lays upon us the duty of wholehearted engagement in praise of God: "With my whole heart will I praise Thee." The commands again and again in the Psalms to praise Him with a loud voice, to lift up our voices--what is that saying? It's not that God is deaf and He can't hear us unless, as it were, we scream in His ear at 50 decibels. No, no, it's simply underscoring the fact that the Father seeks worship in spirit. If you saw a bunch of people who claimed that they were wholly committed to Alabama beating Notre Dame in the postseason bowl game, and they sat there on the Alabama side unenthusiastically saying, "Go get 'em Tide. Go get 'em," you'd say, "That's ridiculous." The fact that the heart is in it is reflected in the face, in the body, in the hands, in the volume, every part of it. Alright, is that all negated and canceled simply because the object of our hearty concern is the Living God? No, it sanctifies it; it elevates it. There's a sense in which He is the only One worthy of that kind of involvement--the Living and the True God. And therefore, we must give ourselves wholeheartedly to this aspect of worship, the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

What about our giving? Is the taking up of a collection just sort of a necessary evil to keep the operation in business. Well, if that's the way you view it, that's a sub-biblical view of giving. The Apostle Paul gives us the Biblical philosophy of giving in 2 Corinthians 8, and he says this concerning those poor saints in Macedonia: "For according to their power, I bear witness, yea and beyond their power, they gave of their own accord...and this, not as we had hoped, but first they gave their own selves to the Lord, and to us through the will of God" (v. 3, 5). In other words, it's not merely an activity of the hand involving dollars and cents. It's an activity of the whole

redeemed man or woman presenting himself afresh to God. As he gives of his substance, he's saying, "Lord, I am your purchased possession. This money is but a tangible expression that everything I am is Yours. You've redeemed me, and Lord, afresh I give the entirety of my redeemed personality unto You with my hand as I present the gift. O Lord, my heart goes with it, and I present myself." That's what worship is.

What about listening to sermons? This is perhaps one of the most elevated acts of worship, when the creature sits before his God, the Creator, and submits his mind, his life, his will, his affections, everything he is to the authority of the Word of God. That's the aspect of worship in listening to sermons. I'm taking the place of a creature because God says in His Word, "Let all the earth keep silence before Him." God is speaking. And if God is speaking, I must listen to His voice. And that demands a wholehearted giving of my mind to what is being preached. As it says of the Bereans in Acts 17, "They received the Word with readiness of mind." We read in 2 Timothy 2:7, "Consider what I say [literally it means think upon these things]; for the Lord shall give thee understanding in all things." We're to love God not only with the whole heart, but with all the mind, the soul, and strength, that is, the entirety of my energies as a human being.

Proper listening to sermons is a very draining thing. I remember one time preaching at a conference and the Lord was unusually present, and I was conscious of His help. And I think anyone with any discernment was conscious that God was there. And I'll never forget the remark of a very discerning young woman who came up afterward. She said, "Mr. Martin, I feel absolutely exhausted and exhilarated both at the same time." Well, you see, the measure of her spiritual exhilaration was in direct proportion to her exhaustion in that she had given herself to the ministry of the Word of God. Her mind was active. She was reflecting upon what the truth said to her. Her heart was active. Where the arrows of conviction were coming, there were direct dealings with God, confession of sin, the pouring out of aspirations to God right while the Word is preached. If we could somehow visually conceptualize all that goes on in the minds of a congregation of people when there's true Biblical preaching, we'd be amazed at all the interplay of the hearts of God's people and their God. That ought to be the experience. That's what makes preaching and true listening to preaching a blessed and spiritual experience.

What about praying? When we are led in prayer, the invocation, the pastoral prayer, again, is this just some kind of a thing where we bow our head, shift into neutral, and wait until we hear the phrase "In Jesus name, amen" and then pull our minds together?" No, no, the Scripture says of the early church when they faced that crisis of opposition in Acts 4, they lifted up their voice with one accord to God. Does that mean they all prayed at the same time in the same words? No, someone was the spokesman, but every other heart was engaged, every other mind was focused upon the words of the one who was the spokesman so the Scripture says with one heart and with one voice they lifted up themselves unto God. This is what worshipful prayer is. Now that demands something of you. You do not sit passively. You must during the acts of worship give yourself wholeheartedly to all those various aspects. That is to worship God in spirit.

Then finally, after worship, subsequent to the formal acts of worship, if that worship is not to be, as it were, dubbed as a mere sham, what must be true of us? And let me suggest just two things. Seek to fuse the truth to your mind by discussion and

reflection. Have you heard the Word of God? Seek to fuse what you heard to your mind by discussion and reflection. Was there some aspect of God's character that seemed to be particularly in focus during the prayers that day? Seek to fuse that concept or those concepts to your mind by discussion with your friends and your family. One of the things we do at our home is, on way the home from church in the morning (we have about a five mile ride from the parsonage to the church), we try to discuss the Sunday morning sermon. When we sit for our Sunday dinner, we discuss what the children learned in Sunday school and seek to fuse it to their minds by mutual discussion. But then secondly, you must seek to fuse the truth to your heart by fervent prayer. Having heard, now you must have that truth fused to your heart and to your experience by fervent prayer. Turn what you hear into fuel for prayer and plead with God to make it applicable to your own life. If the burden of the sermon has been with reference to the need for laborers in the harvest field, pray the Lord of the harvest to send them forth. If the thrust has been some aspect of Christian duty, pray it in. This is how the truth become part and parcel of our entire being.

Now this has been a very cursory, a very quick, a very surface treatment of this whole great subject of true worship and what it demands of us. But I hope it has sufficed to do a couple of things. I hope it has shocked some of you into realizing that perhaps you never really worshipped, and that that discovery will be such as to cause you this morning perhaps for the first time really to experience what worship is. So in the time between now and the invocation, the opening prayer, the opening hymn some 50 yards away or whatever it is in the main sanctuary, rather than having chit chat with one another about a number of things, let's take care of anything we need to take care of, go into that building and sit and reflect upon the greatness of our God. Sit in that building and prepare your mind and heart by reading some of these portions so that when that opening hymn is announced, your heart may run out to God in fervent praise and in genuine adoration of His being. During the singing of the psalms and the hymns and the giving of your substance, the attention to the Word of God, you feel yourself beginning to, as it were, relax, say "Lord, give me grace to worship You in spirit. I would not dishonor You by rendering halfhearted worship. You're too glorious a God to be worshipped in that way." You will find both the exhaustion and the exhilaration, then, of the acts of true and Biblical worship.

The Father's on a quest this morning, and that quest is not to have buildings called churches filled with people all singing the same words at the same time. Jesus said the Father is seeking those to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Will He find that in you? Will He find it in me? God grant that He shall to His praise and to our profit.

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