

In the Habit of Worshiping

Psalm 34:1-10

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I want to give you exactly 18 seconds to answer this question: How's your worship life? Ready, set, go!

Now here's a follow-up question: Beyond how often you worship, how did you evaluate your worship life? What did you actually evaluate? In other words, how do you know how your worship life is?

Here's a final question: What does it mean that we are far more adept at evaluating a worship service than we are at evaluating our worship life?

I'm not asking these questions to shame you, but to highlight what I think is some fundamental confusion about worship. Today, as we conclude our series entitled "In the Habit," I want to explore what worship is and how the habit of worship shapes us. Of all the habits we've discussed that shape our lives, we've saved the foundational habit for last. Every other habit flows from and feeds into our worship life.

To get into get a clearer understanding of worship, let's read Psalm 34:1-10 together:

¹ *I will praise the LORD at all times.*

I will constantly speak his praises.

² *I will boast only in the LORD;*

let all who are helpless take heart.

³ *Come, let us tell of the LORD's greatness;*

let us exalt his name together.

⁴ *I prayed to the LORD, and he answered me.*

He freed me from all my fears.

⁵ *Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy;*

no shadow of shame will darken their faces.

⁶ *In my desperation I prayed, and the LORD listened;*

he saved me from all my troubles.

⁷ *For the angel of the LORD is a guard;*

he surrounds and defends all who fear him.

⁸ *Taste and see that the LORD is good.*

Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!

⁹ *Fear the LORD, you his godly people,*

for those who fear him will have all they need.

¹⁰ *Even strong young lions sometimes go hungry,*

but those who trust in the LORD will lack no good thing.

Let's start with a foundational question: What is worship? How would you define it? Many of us have, unfortunately, turned worship into a noun. Worship is something we attend. Worship is something we "go to." From that perspective, worship is like a performance – trained professionals do their act and the rest of us passively observe...and, let's be honest, often critique. But I think that belies a fundamental misunderstanding of what worship is.

Worship isn't a noun; it's a verb. It's something we do, or to be more precise, it's how God's people are to live...not just on Sunday morning but every moment of every day. To worship literally means to ascribe worth to God, to tell God how worthy God is, to give God our praise and thanksgiving. God is the recipient of worship, not us.

Let me try and give some definition to worship.

There are lots of definitions out there, but I find this one helpful: Worship begins with recognition of the awesomeness of God, continues when our hearts are gripped and moved by the love of God for us, and then is expressed in thought, word or deed. Let's break that definition down a bit.

Worship begins with recognition of the awesomeness of God. A few years ago I spent a week with my family in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan at a family camp. One night we laid end to end on a boat dock staring up into the sky. Because there are so few lights in the U.P. and because the sky was so clear that night, the stars were phenomenal. From horizon to horizon, millions of tiny points of light were visible, as was the Milky Way. Shooting stars blazed across the great curtain of night. It was spectacular. It boggled my mind to think about the sheer vastness of space and I was overwhelmed with this sense of the awesomeness of God. Passages of scripture came to mind, like this one from Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

If we'll have eyes to see, so many experiences in this life draw our hearts and minds away from ourselves and to the awesomeness of God...a newborn baby, a sunset, a field of wildflowers. I can't even look at a blade of grass and notice the intricacy of its design, and think about the process of photosynthesis that happens within, and not be filled with true wonder at the awesomeness of our Creator. I want to suggest that that's where worship starts – in the recognition of the awesomeness of God. But it doesn't end there.

Worship continues when our hearts are gripped and moved by the love of God for us. A strange thing happens when we become aware of how awesome God is. We immediately become aware of how small we are. I'm all for a healthy self-esteem, but let's face it – in the grand scheme of the cosmos, we aren't much! And yet Scripture says over and over again that we are loved, cherished by God. David put it this way in Psalm 8,

When I look up into the night skies and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you have made—I cannot understand how you can bother with mere puny man, to pay any attention to him! And yet you have made him only a little lower than the angels and placed a crown of glory and honor upon his head.

I had a friend named Tom in Columbus, Ohio who recently died from cancer. He was a huge Cleveland Browns fan, and one of his dying wishes was to get to one last Browns game. Somehow that wish found its way to Baker Mayfield, the Cleveland quarterback. Mayfield flew Tom and several of his friends to the game and hosted them in one of his sky boxes. Mayfield's wife, Emily, spent over a half hour with them. And when the game was over, Mayfield personally drove Tom and his friends to their hotel. Baker Mayfield is a big deal in the world of football, especially to a Browns fan. Tom was overwhelmed with the love and care that he received that day.

How much more overwhelmed are we when we are moved by the fact that the Creator of the universe knows each one of us and loves us unconditionally? For Christians, nothing brings this reality of the goodness of God home more than the cross. When we grapple with the reality of who and what we are, and consider the lengths to which God has gone to show us his love, to redeem us, to save us, to make us His own precious possession, we can't help but be gripped at heart. And our hearts well up with gratitude and love for God.

And that leads to the final part of our worship definition. When we recognize the awesomeness of our God, and are gripped and moved by the love of God for us, we express it in thought, word or deed. Our reading today from Psalm 34 is a beautiful example of this idea. Through experience, David had come to know the goodness and wonder of God, and it so filled his heart that it overflowed from his lips. *"I will praise the LORD at all times. I will constantly speak his praises,"* he said. But those words are just the tip of the iceberg. Worship is words and singing, but it is also dancing with abandon, weeping with joy, clapping with gratitude, serving with humility.

The Bible is filled with lots of varied expressions of worship, but one word that is frequently connected to worship is the word "sacrifice." Hebrews 13:15 says, *"Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise."* Romans 12:1 says, *"Therefore, I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship."*

In the ancient traditions of Israelite worship, God's people used to bring animal sacrifices to both appease God's righteous anger as well as to express their gratitude for God's goodness. But Jesus taught us that God doesn't desire animal sacrifices. God desires the sacrifice of our love and our praise. When we come to worship primarily focusing on what we get out of the experience, we miss the heart of worship. The more we pour ourselves out in honoring and praising God, the more God fills us with the joy of His presence. Worship is a sacrifice, but in the end we always receive more than we give. The habit of worship shapes us by focusing our hearts and our minds on God – God's presence and love.

When we recognize the awesomeness of God and are gripped and moved by His love, we can't help but overflow with praise and gratitude and honor from our hearts. That is worship. It's what disciples do no matter what the season of our discipleship journey. It's what we do, not just on Sunday morning but every day. It's what we do because of who we are as children of God.

I want to challenge you to do something throughout this week that I personally find makes my experience of worship on Sunday morning so much more powerful and meaningful. Our reading from Psalm 34 this morning included these words, *"Taste and see that the Lord is good."* What does it mean to taste and see that the Lord is good? I believe it means opening up the eyes of our hearts to see that everything good in life is a reflection of the loving heart of God. Every sunrise and sunset. Every child's giggle. Every drink of cold water on a hot day. Every smile from a stranger. Every hug from a friend. Every bird song. Every moment of restful sleep. Everything good thing in this life is meant to point you to the awesomeness of our loving God.

This week allow yourself to become more aware of God's presence in every moment of the day. Taste and see God's goodness and love all around you. You'll find that in doing so your heart will overflow with praise and gratitude. You won't be able to wait until next Sunday to worship God. So don't. Worship wherever you are and let the habit of worship shape your life.