



Foundations: WORSHIP
Luke 19:45-48 (AFBC 1/28/18)

As most of us know, the last big football game of the year takes place next Sunday, so this cartoon would seem timely. It pictures a minister standing in the pulpit—but the large sanctuary he's in is nearly empty. There are only four other people present--a young man, and three elderly women. It's Super Bowl Sunday.

The minister affirms the four who showed up for worship by saying: "I'm so grateful there are at least a few of us who've made the effort to come to worship and feed on the Word of God—people who don't believe that God is less important than that football game on TV today."

Suddenly, the young man jumps up out of his pew and, as he runs out of the sanctuary, he says, "Oh no... I forgot about the game...!"

Do you ever find yourself thinking that you've got something that's more important to do than this—worship? There's work to be done, books to read, movies to see, and web sites to surf.

Or, to get at this another way: why are you here today? The answer could be "habit." Not all habits are bad--though good habits are often called "disciplines." Study habits, exercise, budgeting and saving money—these are all good disciplines.

Attending worship is a good spiritual habit. The Bible tells us that it was Jesus' custom--his habit, if you will--to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath Day. Some of us are here because it's our habit.

Of course, at some point in life, we had to make the decision to be here—we chose this as a discipline that we would follow. So, why did we make this choice? Why do we choose to worship?

Others might be here today because they're struggling with God. Right now, they could be grieving... or hurting, lost or lonely. They're here searching for answers.

Of course, you may be here against your will. Your parents made you--and they're bigger than you are. Or your wife made you come--maybe she's bigger than you are.

A few of you sent me this story of a man (thanks!—not sure why you thought I would like it though...) who was sleeping soundly when his wife yanks the covers off the bed and says, “It’s time to get up and get ready to go to church.”

But the man tells his wife, “I don’t wanna’ go to church today. Some of those people are mean, and they really don’t care if I’m there or not. Please let me stay home... just this one day.”

But his wife insists: “No. You have to go to church today, and they will care if you don’t show up. You’re the preacher.”

Why are you here in worship today? Here’s the right answer to the question. We are here to worship God. We worship God to express to Him our love. We pray, and sing, and give, and listen—all to show the sincerity of our love.

So why did we get up this morning and come to church? Did we arrive knowing what we’re here for? Are we in church today because we love God and want Him to know this through our worship?

Worship, above everything else, is why the church exists. Worship is the one thing that every church has in common. From large mega-churches to small family chapels, we gather each Lord’s Day for the same purpose: to worship God.

We’re involved in lots of other activities—most of them are important. But all the other activities are meaningless unless they in some way connect back to this: the worship of God.

Worship is foundational. It defines us as a church, and as individual believers. Ralph Waldo Emerson put it like this:

“The gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that. And a man will worship something—have no doubt about that, either. He may think that his tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of his heart—but it will come out. That which dominates will determine his life and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming.”

Did you get that: “What we’re worshipping, we’re becoming.” This is how important worship is. Faith changes people who are

indifferent toward God into people who love God, and who then live out their love by worshipping God and serving others in His name.

In the fourth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus talks about worship. He and his disciples are traveling through Samaria when they happen upon a woman at a well. During Jesus' conversation with the woman, the subject of worship comes up.

The woman says (v. 19b), **"Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." 21 Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 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. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."** (John 4:19b-24)

Samaritans and Jews didn't see eye to eye on where worship should happen, but Jesus says that worship can happen anywhere. Take this church as an example.

Look through our historical room, and you'll find that this church has worshipped in several different structures over its 197-year history. No doubt there were folks who questioned whether the new sanctuary would be as worshipful as the old one, but we continue to gather here to worship God. It's not about a building.

It's not about style either. The worship styles of the Jews and Samaritans were different--just like we have different styles of worship today. We can worship--or not worship--no matter what style the service takes. Worship is really not about style.

So if worship is not about place or style, then what is worship about? Well, let's take a look at another incident in the ministry of Jesus. We find this one in **Luke 19:45-48:**

⁴⁵When Jesus entered the temple courts, he began to drive out those who were selling. ⁴⁶"It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be a house of prayer'; but you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" ⁴⁷Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law

and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. ⁴⁸Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.

When Jesus said God's house would be a house of prayer, he was quoting from Isaiah 56:7. Let's look at this passage too. It may help us to understand what kind of worship Jesus expects of us.

Isaiah 56:6-7: And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

1. This seems to express at least three foundational aspects of worship, and it should be our aim to get these right whenever we worship God. First, **WE CONNECT WITH GOD IN WORSHIP.**

Isaiah 56:6 speaks of those "who bind themselves to the Lord." By the way, Isaiah mentions foreigners and, earlier, he even speaks of "eunuchs," who had always been excluded from worship—but they are now to be included, Isaiah says.

The word "bind" that Isaiah uses here is the process of taking single threads and twisting them together to form a rope. All the individual strands are needed for the rope to be strong.

If you and I are truly to understand worship, we have to be willing to be bound to God. True worship does this. We get in step with God. We want to go where He's going, and do what He's doing.

Psalm 42 begins with a powerful image of the Psalmist's desire to be connected with God: **1 As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.**

Worship begins with a spiritual yearning to come into God's presence. Increasingly, though, we struggle to find the time to worship. It's a burden to fit God into our crowded schedules.

In *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen tells a story that comes from ancient India. It goes like this:

Four royal brothers decided each to master a special ability. Time went by, and the brothers met to reveal what they had learned. "I have mastered a science," said the first, "by which I can take but a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it."

"I," said the second, "know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones." The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin, and the hair." "And I," concluded the fourth, "know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete."

Thereupon the brothers went into the jungle to find a bone so they could demonstrate their specialties. As fate would have it, the bone they found was a lion's. One added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life.

Shaking its mane, the ferocious beast arose and jumped on his creators. He killed them all and vanished contentedly into the jungle.

Friends, we also have the capacity to create something that can eventually destroy us. Our goals and dreams and amusements can consume us. Our possessions can turn on us if they become too important in our lives--more important to us than God. Do we ever allow lesser gods to consume us—to demand the lion's share of our time, talents, money--our very lives?

If we love God, we connect with Him on a regular basis. He gave us the Lord's Day for this reason and told us not to neglect the assembling of ourselves together—in order that we may demonstrate our love for Him. It is foundational to Christian living that we connect with the Lord in worship.

2. Now let's take this further. In order to connect with God in worship, we must understand that **OUR FOCUS IS ON GOD AND NOT US.** True worship focuses on God.

It's so easy to get this wrong. Wired the way we are, we're tempted to assume that worship should focus on us. How many times have we heard people excuse their lack of participation in worship by saying they just "aren't being fed."

Well, that's a legitimate concern—we all need to eat!--but it misses

the point. Do you ever hear people questioning whether God is getting anything out of their worship--is He "being fed?"

Worship is about expressing our love and adoration for God. We worship PRIMARILY so that GOD gets something out of it, not us!

Until God gets something out of our worship, we never will. Until God is blessed by our worship, we won't be blessed either.

Be careful not to think of worship as something that should entertain us. That's not its purpose. What matters is that God's being honored by our faithfulness, devotion, and generosity. We want God to know He's loved and exalted through our worship!

Isaiah is focused on God when he says, "I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple." Focusing on anything requires effort, concentration, and energy. To worship God in Spirit and in truth requires that we bring our best to the experience—that we "stay focused."

You may not recognize the name Bertoldo de Giovanni, but he was a student of the great sculptor Donatello, and he became the teacher of Michelangelo, perhaps the greatest sculptor of all time.

Michelangelo was only 14 years old, but already enormously gifted when he began studies with Bertoldo. This wise teacher realized that gifted people are often tempted to just coast along, so he kept after his young prodigy to work hard and keep growing.

One day he found Michelangelo toying with a piece of sculpture that was far beneath his abilities—so Bertoldo took a hammer and smashed the work to pieces, shouting, "Michelangelo, talent is cheap; dedication is costly!" (Gary Inrig, *A Call to Excellence*)

How often do we coast through worship? We just go through the motions in our singing, praying, giving, and listening. We settle for something cheap... when true worship is costly.

Football players have a saying--"leave it all on the field." It means they don't hold anything back during the game. Should God expect anything less from us when we worship Him?

Are we holding back in our worship of God? Why not give God our best! Show Him how much we love Him. Stay focused on what we're doing. And never leave here... unaffected!

3. Friends, it is when we're connected with God and focused on Him that we also receive a blessing: **WE ARE FILLED WITH JOY IN WORSHIP.** The passage from Isaiah 56 that Jesus quoted says, "... I will... give them joy in my house of prayer."

God intends for our worship to be joyful—for us to be filled with joy! Are we? Or do we sometimes miss the mark?

Do you know about Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream? Ben and Jerry were college dropouts who spent five dollars on a mail order course on "how to make ice cream." In a few years, they had become one of the largest producers of gourmet ice cream.

Early on, Ben and Jerry loved what they were doing; but as the company grew, it stopped being fun. All the pressures and responsibilities were robbing them of their zeal and creativity.

So... they changed their focus. They insisted they were not in business to sell ice cream, but to create joy. They hired a new Director of Joy for the company whose job it was to plan fun activities and celebrations for the company and the community.

1) Speakers were mounted to the factory walls so that workers could listen to music while running the assembly line. 2) They set aside 7 1/2 % of company profits for charities and special causes.

3) Here's one famous example of this: when the stock market crashed on Black Monday, people were panicked and worried. So Ben and Jerry went out on the sidewalks of Wall Street giving out free bowls of ice cream—a new flavor that they called "economic crunch." (Westfall, 100-101)

Maybe we could learn something from these two. We often miss the joy in worship—and in life! We forget that Jesus came to give us JOY—one of the fruits of God's Spirit within us. Even before Jesus came, though, King David prayed: **"Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation." (Ps. 51:12)**

We are here to express our love for God—through worship—worship that connects us to God, worship that stays focused on God, worship that leads to joy... in us! This is foundational to who we are as followers of Jesus Christ.