

WORTHY WORSHIP

Malachi 1:7-2:9

(sermon idea from Brian Harbour, Proclaim, April-June 1994)

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Amarillo, Texas
August 14, 2022**

Worship comes in many forms today. Unfortunately, Stephanie Pierce in Portland, Oregon, decided to create a religion that worshiped a rock legend. It's called the "Church of Elvis." No kidding. It was downtown on Ankeny Street. The church was open 24 hours a day – like an ATM. It's coin operated. The church offered confession, a sermon, and a photo opportunity with the King. Drop a quarter into the machine and you choose – was your sin a mere thought or an action? The machine is programmed to accept confessions of sins that relate to six areas: dirty laundry, dirty teeth, condescending sneers, money, overeating, or believing Elvis is dead.

For a buck, the Church of Elvis would conduct a wedding ceremony. (Having paid for two weddings, I may transfer my membership to the Church of Elvis!) The reason that the marriage sacrament was four times the cost of the one quarter confession is largely due to the catering bill. The wedding kit came with rice.

It's funny, but it's tragic. Worship centered around a dead – yes, dead, as reported by the AP and UPI – rock star. How unfruitful and misguided can worship become?

The church became so popular that thirty neighbors signed a petition claiming that the "Church of Elvis" is a nuisance. The Church of Elvis is now closed.

Even mainline denominations have introduced modern methods of worship.

Pastor Kleist of the First Lutheran Church in Stewartsville, New Jersey, had a large sign advertising - and I quote - "Express Worship." From beginning to end, this worship service lasts a guaranteed twenty-two minutes – or your tithe back. Why twenty-two minutes? Because Kleist figures that Americans can only focus in worship for the length of time it takes to watch a sitcom – thirty minutes minus commercials equals twenty-two minutes.

In twenty-two minutes (now, don't get any ideas), you get a greeting, an apology (sermon), prayer, song, interpretive Bible reading, and discussion. Church attendance is up forty percent.

Is a quarter in a machine dedicated to Elvis worship?

Is a no-hassle twenty-two minute express service worship?

How about our worship? Is it pleasing to God?

Karl Barth, the German theologian, once said, “Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life.”

Eugene Peterson said, **“As a pastor, I don’t like being viewed as nice but insignificant. I bristle when a high-energy executive leaves the place of worship with the comment, ‘This was wonderful, Pastor, but now we have to get back to the real world, don’t we?’ I had thought we were in the most-real world, the world revealed as God’s, a world believed to be invaded by God’s grace and turning on the pivot of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. The executive’s comment brings me up short: he isn’t taking this seriously. Worshiping God is marginal to making money. Prayer is marginal to the bottom line. Christian salvation is a brand preference.”** (Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*)

Malachi said that worship in his day was so repugnant that God wanted the temple doors closed so that worship would cease (1:10).

Is worship as Barth described it or as Malachi described it? Is worship pleasing to God? Or is it repugnant to Him? It can be either. It depends on the worshipers’ attitude and life.

And worship is forever.

Evangelism will end. The opportunity to tell others of Christ will end.

Education will end.

Prophecy will end.

Social service will end.

But worship is forever. What you do today is eternal.

We realize that the best and the brightest in the eternal realm already know this. John’s vision of heaven has four terrifyingly magnificent and wise creatures singing day and night, without ceasing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8). That is all they do, forever and ever. Each time we turn a page in the Book of Revelation, we are looking at yet another scene of worship in heaven. Here it involves the twenty-four elders, there ten thousand times ten thousand angels, elsewhere the martyred saints. (Ben Patterson)

In Malachi, God had become repulsed by the worship of the Israelites because of the way in which they approached worship. They were not giving God their best.

I. REVERENCE (1:6-8)

Right worship is based on reverence.

Malachi 1:6

“ ‘A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?’ says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, ‘How have we despised Your name?’”

A son honors his father, and a servant honors his master – but you have not honored me!

Why? They had not given God their best. They brought God the leftovers – blind bulls, shabby sheep, limping lambs.

Leviticus 22:18-20

Speak to Aaron and to his sons and to all the sons of Israel and say to them, “Any man of the house of Israel or of the aliens in Israel who presents his offering, whether it is any of their votive or any of their freewill offerings, which they present to the Lord for a burnt offering – for you to be accepted – it must be a male without defect from the cattle, the sheep, or the goats. Whatever has a defect, you shall not offer, for it will not be accepted for you.”

This was not acceptable. We are to bring God our best!

How about us? Do we bring to God our best for worship, or is it a tag-on to a busy weekend? Indifference? Boredom? Bringing God our leftovers? God is not pleased. He deserves and demands our best.

[Some] Christian are downright scrupulous in their observance of nine of the commandments, but act as if the command to remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy somehow never even existed.

Although it was the last day of the week, for the Jew the Sabbath was the center, not the end, of the week’s activities. For three days he prepared himself. Then came the Sabbath. Then for three days he meditated on its meaning. As the last, or final, day of the week, the Sabbath was understood to point ahead to the goal toward which history was moving: the great rest of God. When a Jew ceased from his labor, a little eternity invaded his life. He dwelt no longer in the kingdom of necessity, but lived for a few hours in the freedom of the coming kingdom. For this reason, the Sabbath Day’s worship was an eschatological act, an anticipation of an participation in God’s future. The Sabbath told the Jew where he was headed.

When the early Christian church made Sunday the day of worship, it was proclaiming something new about that great final Day Israel looked toward in the Sabbath: the church believed that Day had been inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus. What had been lived toward in the Sabbath was now being lived out of in the Lord’s Day. Henceforth, there was the new Creation, already here and yet to come – now begun, and yet awaiting its consummation at Christ’s return. Sunday said to the worshiper that all of life flowed out of that reality and to that reality.

Sometimes it seems that when we gather for worship on the Lord’s Day, we are headed somewhere, all right, but not toward the consummation of the Kingdom of God. We are

headed toward what we will do after we go to church. We are anxious to have worship over and done with. We want it crisp and snappy, and scheduled early so, as we put it, we can “get on with the day.”

“Get on with what?” I want to know. Get on with family gatherings, recreation, the weekly TV sports extravaganza. (Ben Patterson, *Christianity Today*, Feb 1, 1985)

Years ago, Fred Craddock recalled, “I have a student who, for eight years, taught in a school in Nashville, Tennessee, for children with hearing disorders. Their ears were all right; they just didn’t make contact. He said that after eight years, ‘I just could not stand it anymore. I went home crying; I went to work crying.’ He said, ‘One year, right after the Thanksgiving holiday, there was this beautiful girl in the school. Heather was her name. She was seven years old. We were out on the playground just after our Thanksgiving holiday. I went over to Heather, took her by the shoulders, squatted down in front of her, and said, “Heather? Heather, what did you eat for Thanksgiving?”

‘Heather said, “My shoes are red.”’

“He said to me, ‘I just, I just couldn’t do it anymore.’

“I didn’t have the heart to tell him that he’s going to have experiences pretty close to that [in ministry]. I was in Dallas in a service in which the music, the anthem, the prayers, the songs, everything gelled, and in the sermon, everything was just right. I was in the presence of God. Standing there after the benediction, I didn’t want to move. I was immobilized by the presence of God in the service. Just a guest. A man in the pew in front of me – he didn’t know me, I didn’t know him – turned around and said, ‘Do you think Tom Landry’s going to coach the Cowboys another year?’

“Do you know what the man said to me? The man said, ‘My shoes are red.’” (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 27)

Bring God our best. We are to come in reverence.

The worshiper’s reverence. The first key to worthy worship is the worshiper’s reverence for God. The purpose of worship is to honor Him. The psalmist said, “O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel down before the Lord our maker. For He is our God” (Psalm 95:6-7). Revelation 4:11 states, “Worthy art Thou, our Lord and god, to receive glory and honor and power.” The focus of true worship always is on God.

The most common Old Testament word for worship is *shachah*. The word means “to bow down,” that is, to have a reverential attitude toward God combined with adoration for Him. The basic New Testament word for worship, *proskuneo*, means to “kiss the hand toward” or to “prostrate oneself before” someone. The primary idea is honor. Everything in our worship experience should glorify God and honor Him. (Brian Harbor, *Proclaim*, April-June 1994)

Come to God to worship, giving Him your best, giving Him your reverence.

Henry Ward Beecher, pastor of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn for many years, was one of the most famous preachers in America. People from all over the nation came to worship at his church. One Sunday he was gone, and a visiting preacher substituted for him. When the visiting minister came to the pulpit, the people realized Henry was gone, and some of the people started for the doors. The minister said, “May I have your attention. All those who came here this morning to worship Henry Ward Beecher may now withdraw from the church. All who came to worship God may stay.”

People may come to a worship service for many superficial reasons: to hear a certain preacher, to watch their children perform, to visit with their friends, to fulfill an obligation, to enhance their business opportunities, to see what everyone else is wearing. But only one reason is acceptable –to give honor and praise to God! Worship is not an attempt to entertain worshipers or to stir their emotions. Worship is not an attempt to manipulate worshipers’ minds and hearts. Worship is not an attempt to indoctrinate persons. Worship is, first of all, an attempt to focus our attention on God, to honor Him, and to enable us to experience in our lives His power and presence. (Brian Harbour)

But we must come to worship with our best in reverence to God.

God is Creator. God is Sustainer. God will not be taken for granted. He must be held in reverence. He must be worshiped.

Malachi 1:11

“For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations,” says the Lord of hosts.

Every tongue in heaven and under the earth will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. God will not allow himself to be taken for granted. Not one nation or people on the face of the earth will be allowed to take Him for granted. All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall come and worship before Him because dominion belongs to the Lord and He rules over the earth. (John Piper, *Preaching Today*, 1993)

Not only should we focus on the reverence for God...

II. RESULTS

...let’s note the result in the worshiper.

Malachi 1:9

“But now will you not entreat God’s favor, that He may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will He receive any of you kindly?” says the Lord of hosts.

When we honor God as we should with a reverent worship, when we focus our attention on Him and experience His power and presence – our lives will be changed.

Malachi 1:9 implies that the purpose of worship is to entreat God's favor that He may be gracious to us.

Worship not only honors God, it helps us as well. What are some of the results of worship?

A. Pardon – the opportunity to be forgiven from sin.

Isaiah 6 gives us one of the most penetrating portraits of worship in the Bible. Sensing the holiness of God, Isaiah said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5). Then one of the seraphim flew to him with a burning coal in his hand and touched his mouth with it and said, "Behold this has touched your lips, and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven" (v. 7). (Brian Harbour)

B. Power

Worship gives us the opportunity to tap God's power. We come with our weakness to the One who is strong. We come with our impotence to the One who is omnipotent. We come with our weariness to the One who is steadfast.

C. Peace

A third result of true worship is peace. Worship provides the opportunity for people to experience God's comfort. We live in an age of anxiety. Our biggest anxieties come from two sources: yesterday and tomorrow. Worship is an antidote for worry because it enables us to draw near to God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God holds all time in His hands. Because worship puts us in touch with God and reminds us that all things work together for good to them that love the Lord, worship gives us peace. (Brian Harbour)

Ruth Bell Graham said, "I have learned that worship and worry cannot live in the same heart. They are mutually exclusive."

Years ago, the world watched as three gray whales, icebound off Point Barrow, Alaska, floated battered and bloody, gasping for breath at a hole in the ice. Their only hope: somehow to be transported five miles past the ice pack to open sea. Rescuers began cutting a string of breathing holes about twenty yards apart in the six-inch-thick ice. For eight days they coaxed the whales from one hole to the next, mile after mile. Along the way, one of the trio vanished and was presumed dead. But finally, with the help of Russian icebreakers, the whales Putu and Siku swam to freedom. In a way, worship is a string of breathing holes the Lord provides his people. Battered and bruised in a world frozen over with greed, selfishness, and hatred, we rise for air in church, a place to breathe again, to be loved and encouraged until that day when the Lord forever shatters the ice cap. (Craig Brian Larson, Arlington Heights, IL, *Leadership*, Vol. 11, #2+)

D. Purpose

When we understand who God is, we can better understand who we are. Our purpose is to live in right relationship to Him. To honor Him for who He is. To trust Him to care for us.

III. RESPONSE

In a mission in Africa, a young convert was attending worship service right after her conversion. The pastor prayed just before the offering. In his prayer he spoke of the need to give to God a spirit of sacrifice because of what He had done. Then the offering plate was passed. This young girl had no money. Yet, she had an inescapable urge to respond to the grace of God in her life. So as the plate came to her, she silently set it on the floor, got up, and stood on it.

Every true worship experience demands a similar response. Peter said in his first epistle that believers are “to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). Paul said in Romans 12:1 that we are to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices – “The true worship that you should offer.”

If you have been in church but never have been compelled to give sacrificially to the work of God, you have not worshiped. If you go to church and try to palm off on God the leftovers of your life, you have not truly worshiped. If you have been to church but never once have felt the compelling urge to say with Isaiah, “Here am I, Lord, send me,” you have not truly worshiped. True worship is worship in which we are compelled to respond in some meaningful way to the grace of God in our lives.

Conclusion – Worship is not an elective activity that Christians can take or leave. Worship is the central part of the experience of being a Christian. Worship is not something we do to please our parents, pacify our peers, and promote our pastor. It is something we do to honor God, to help ourselves, and to stimulate our obedience to God. We will not please God or experience spiritual prosperity until we return to the kind of worship that is worthy of God. (Brian Harbour)