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Worship / #6
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Sermon Summary #6

The What, Who, When, Where, and How of Biblical Worship

I've lost count of the number of weddings I've performed over the past 44 years of ministry, but I do remember one in particular. It was the wedding of an American man and a British young lady. She happened to be living with Ann and me at the time. When we sat down to discuss details of the ceremony she asked if I would be willing to use the vows that are frequently employed in older Anglican wedding ceremonies. "Sure," I said. Among the things that both the bride and groom would recite were these words of commitment:

"My body will adore you, and your body alone will I cherish. I will, with my body, declare your worth."

A bit later in the vows are these words:

"With my body, I thee honor."

As I've thought about these vows down through the years I began to see how appropriate such words are not only for a husband and wife but also for the Christian and God. We worship God with our minds and our hearts and our wills. But did you know that the Bible also calls on you and me to adore and honor and cherish God with our bodies? There are numerous texts that describe this, some of which we'll see in a moment. But for now consider Romans 12:1, where Paul says,

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your **bodies** as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

This really shouldn't surprise us given what Paul said elsewhere about our bodies:

"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Our physical bodies are the temple or the dwelling place of the Spirit of God himself. One of the things we tend to forget or entirely overlook is the fact that **spirituality is physical**. Five times in Genesis 1 we read of how God takes stock of the physical creation and then says: "It is good." Although God is spirit, he created matter; he created the entire physical realm and pronounced it good. We are not like the angels who are spirit beings: we are also physical beings. And when God chose to enter this world in the person of Jesus to redeem us from sin, he took to himself a literal, physical body. Here is how C. S. Lewis put it:

"There is no use trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it. . . ."

I know some muddle-headed Christians have talked as if Christianity thought that sex, or the body, or pleasure, were bad in themselves. But they were wrong. Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body – which believes that matter is good, that God Himself once took on a human body, and that some kind of body is going to be given to us even in Heaven and is going to be an essential part of our happiness, our beauty, and our energy."

What would you say to a physically healthy married man who refuses ever to embrace or kiss his wife? What would you think if he were to say, "Ah, my love for my wife is an affection of the heart. I don't need to love her physically; only emotionally"? I suspect that such a marriage is headed for serious problems!

So today I want to talk about what it means to worship God with our bodies. But that is only one part of what I want us to consider. It is the “How” question in today’s title. But we must also answer the what, who, when, and where of worship.

What?

Perhaps the best way to answer the question, “What is worship?” is to look at the terms used to describe it. There are @45 different words in Hebrew for worship and a dozen or so in Greek. We’ll look only at the OT terminology.

(1) The Hebrew word *halal* is used more than 100x and means something along the lines of, “to be boastful” or “to brag” or “to shout with excitement and triumph.” The word carries the thought of excitement, exuberance, and exultation. When we sing, say, or shout “Hallelujah” we are saying, “Praise be to the Lord” or “Boast in the Lord!” It is used in such texts as:

“Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise” (Ps. 84:4).

“Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord” (Ps. 102:18).

As one author has said, “*Halal* is the Hebrew equivalent of whatever you say when you are watching a football game and your team has just scored the winning points. . . . This is the word of any experience calling for excited boasting or joyful expression” (R. Allen, 64).

(2) The verb *yadah* means “to acknowledge in public” and is often translated in the psalms as “to give thanks.”

“I will *give thanks* to the Lord with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds” (Ps. 9:1).

I’ll have more to say about this in a moment.

(3) The verb *barak* means “to bless” –

“Sing to the Lord, *bless* his name” (Ps. 96:2).

“*Bless* the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, *bless* his holy name!” (Ps. 103:1).

(4) The word *tehillah* is a derivative of *halal* and means “to sing *halals* to God, to laud and to praise with song.” This is the word we find in Psalm 22:3,

“Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Ps. 22:3).

(5) The word *zamar* means “to pluck the strings of an instrument” or in some other fashion to “praise with music.” We find it in texts such as these:

“It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High” (Ps. 92:1).

“Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works!” (1 Chron. 16:9).

There are other Hebrew verbs that carry much the same meaning, such as *shir* (Ps. 96:1) and *ranan* (Ps. 95:1).

(6) The word *shabah* means “to laud”, as in Psalm 117:1,

“Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples!” (Ps. 117:1; here the word rendered “extol” in the ESV could as easily be translated, “*Laud* him, all peoples!”).

The word means to speak well of someone, to eulogize them. Consider how we speak of those graduating with a superb academic record: “Magna Cum *Laude*” and “Summa Cum *Laude*.”

(7) The verb *rua* describes *shouting* to the Lord in joy and praise and thanksgiving.

“Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise [i.e., let us shout] to the rock of our salvation!” (Ps. 95:1).

“Make a joyful noise [i.e., shout!] to the Lord, all the earth!” (Ps. 100:1).

Biblical praise or worship is not only rarely, if ever silent; it is loud and noisy!

There are other important words such as *qara* / “to proclaim” (Ps. 116:17) and *rum* / “to extol” or “to lift high” (Ps. 145:1). They are all words of sound. Worship in the OT is almost always vocal and public.

We see then what worship is. ***It is the joyful, loud response of all that we are, in adoration and celebration and enjoyment, of all that God is.*** In worship we do not expand, contribute to, enlarge, or increase God’s greatness and glory, but we announce it, declare it, make it known, and proclaim the worth and majesty that is already and always true of him.

Who?

Is worship the privilege of a select, elite group of super-saints? Is it only the worship team and band that properly praise God? No! ***All of creation*** is responsible to worship and has the indescribable privilege of making known the greatness and glory of God.

“Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth” (Ps. 96:11-13a).

“Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together” (Ps. 98:7-8).

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!” (Ps. 100:1).

“Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples” (Ps. 117:1; see Isa. 42:10-12; Rev. 5:11-14).

Even the ***angels*** are responsible to praise God:

“Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will! Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion” (Ps. 103:20-22a).

“Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts!” (Ps. 148:2; see Ps. 89:5-7; Rev. 4-5).

When?

When is it appropriate to worship the Lord? ***Always***. Is there ever a time that is inappropriate? No. Praise is an eternal exercise. Praise is not something you do only on a Sunday morning!

“I will bless the Lord *at all times*; his praise shall *continually* be in my mouth” (Ps. 34:1).

“Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise *all the day long*” (Ps. 35:28).

“In God we have boasted *continually*, and we will give thanks to your name *forever*” (Ps. 44:8).

“I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord *forever*” (Ps. 89:1).

“I will sing to the Lord *as long as I live*; I will sing praise to my God *while I have being*” (Ps. 104:33).

“Blessed be the name of the Lord *from this time forth and forevermore! From the rising of the sun to its setting*, the name of the Lord is to be praised!” (Ps. 113:2-3).

“Through him then let us *continually* offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15).

To these we could add Psalm 71:6-8, 14-18, 24; 146:1-2; Rev. 4:8.

Where?

In his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, Jesus said this in response to her question about whether it was fitting to worship God on Mt. Gerizim or in Jerusalem:

“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:21, 23).

Geography is irrelevant to worship. The attitude of one’s heart is the only thing that matters. But one thing can be said with certainty: God calls on us primarily to worship him in corporate assembly with all of God’s people:

“Sing praises to the Lord, who sits enthroned in Zion! Tell *among the peoples* his deeds!” (Ps. 9:1).

We see this emphasis on worship among the people of God yet again in Pss. 22:22-25; 34:2-3; 35:18; 40:9-10; 84:1-4, 10; 95:1-7; 105:1; 135:1-3; 149:1; Col. 3:16; Heb. 10:24-25; 1 Peter 2:4-10. I especially love Psalm 109:30,

“With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord; I will praise him *in the midst of the throng*” (Ps. 109:30).

One reason why God called his Old Covenant people to public praise is because that was the primary way in which he could receive the honor due his name. In Hebrew there is no word which means “thank you” when you are addressing God. That’s hard for us to understand because words like “gratitude” and “appreciation” and “thank you” are so common to us. ***In the OT the word used in place of “thanks” was “praise”!*** That is to say, instead of saying “Thank You” to God the people of Israel would turn and tell others what God had done. Let me illustrate.

There was a veteran medical missionary in India who had developed a remarkable procedure to overcome the progressive blindness endemic to the people of that particular region. He would often comment that people who left his clinic, knowing they would now be able to see, would not say “Thank you,” for that vocabulary was not in their dialect. Instead, they would say, ***“I will tell your name!”*** That is precisely what we find in the OT. People praised God for all that he had done by telling of his name. It was their only way of saying, “Thank you!”

How?

The Bible is full of descriptions of the many bodily or physical expressions and postures of praise. Let me mention a few.

(1) There is first of all ***the clapping of hands***. I’m amazed at how often I hear people say that clapping of the hands or applauding of God is irreverent or sacrilegious. Are you kidding me? Consider these texts:

“Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy” (Ps. 47:1).

“Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together” (Ps. 98:8).

“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (Isa. 55:12).

Clapping is an expression of joy and triumph and jubilation. When the mood or timing is right for clapping, do it with gusto. Of course, in times of somber and serious meditation or prayer, clapping would be less fitting. We must be sensitive to every situation in our times of worship.

(2) **Dancing** is also frequently mentioned in Scripture. Let's remember that biblical dancing never involved two people of the opposite sex pairing off to music. Biblical dancing was never for the purpose of entertainment or amusement but was always an expression of joy and triumph following God's activity and grace shown to his people.

"Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing" (Exod. 15:20).

"Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!" (Ps. 149:3).

"Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!" (Ps. 150:4).

See also 2 Samuel 6:14-16; Jeremiah 31:4, 13.

(3) People would also **stand** when they worshiped, a sign of respect and honor in the presence of God. See Psalm 134:1; 135:2; 2 Chron. 20:18-19.

(4) **Kneeling** was also an appropriate posture in praise of God. Numerous examples can be cited in both the Old and New Testaments. People would kneel to pray (Daniel 6:10; Luke 22:41; Acts 7:60; 9:40; 20:36; 21:5; Eph. 3:14) and to praise (Psalm 95:6; 2 Chron. 6:13).

(5) Some would bow their heads low or fall prostrate on the ground. One of the principal Hebrew words (*hawah*) often translated simply as "worship" means "to make oneself prostrate." We see this in Genesis 24:26, 48; Exodus 4:31; 12:27; 34:8; 1 Chron. 29:20; 2 Chron. 7:1-3; 20:18-19; Nehemiah 8:6; Psalm 5:7. We should also remember that the Greek verb most often translated "worship" (*proskuneō*) literally means "to fall down and pay homage." See especially Revelation 4:9-10; 5:8, 14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:10; 22:8.

(6) Finally, there is the practice of **the raising of one's hands**. Explicit biblical precedent for doing so is pervasive. I don't know if I've found all biblical instances of it, but consider this smattering of texts.

"So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands" (Psalm 63:4).

"To you, O LORD, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit. Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary" (Psalm 28:1).

"Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you" (Psalm 88:9).

"I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes" (Psalm 119:48).

"Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD!" (Psalm 134:2).

And then there are these many texts as well: 2 Chron. 6:12-13; Ezra 9:5; Nehemiah 8:6; Psalm 141:1-2; 143:6; Lamentations 3:41; 1 Timothy 2:8.

If someone should object and say that few of these texts speak of worship (see Pss. 63:4; 134:2), but only of prayer (as if a rigid distinction can even be made between the two; indeed, I can't recall ever worshipping God without praying to him!), my question is simply this: ***Why do you assume that the appropriate place for your hands is at your side and you need an explicit biblical warrant for raising them? Wouldn't it be just as reasonable to assume that the appropriate place for one's hands is raised toward heaven, calling for an explicit biblical warrant (other than gravity or physical exhaustion) to keep them low?***

The human hand gives visible expression to so many of our beliefs, feelings, and intentions. When I taught homiletics (the art of preaching), one of the most difficult tasks was getting young preachers to use their hands properly. Either from embarrassment or fear, they would keep them stuffed in their pockets, hidden from sight behind their backs, or nervously twiddle them in a variety of annoying ways.

Our hands speak loudly. When angry, we clench our fists, threatening harm to others. When guilty, we hide our hands or hold incriminating evidence from view. When we're feeling uneasy or fidgety, we sit on them to obscure our inner selves. When worried, we wring them. When we're afraid, we use them to cover our face or hold tightly to someone for protection. When desperate or frustrated, we throw them wildly in the air, perhaps also in resignation or dismay. When confused, we extend them in bewilderment, as if asking for advice and direction. When hospitable, we use them to warmly receive those in our presence. When suspicious, we use them to keep someone at bay, or perhaps point an accusing finger in their direction.

Does it not seem wholly appropriate, therefore, to raise them to God when we seek him in prayer or celebrate him with praise? So again, why do I worship with hands raised?

Because like one who *surrenders to a higher authority*, I yield to God's will and ways and submit to his guidance and power and purpose in my life. It is my way of saying, "God, I am yours to do with as you please."

Because like one who expresses *utter vulnerability*, I say to the Lord: "I have nothing to hide. I come to you open handed, concealing nothing. My life is yours to search and sanctify. I'm holding nothing back. My heart, soul, spirit, body and will are an open book to you."

Because like one who needs help, I confess my *utter dependency* on God for everything. I cry out: "O God, I entrust my life to you. If you don't take hold and uplift me, I will surely sink into the abyss of sin and death. I rely on your strength alone. Preserve me. Sustain me. Deliver me."

Because like one who *happily and expectantly receives a gift* from another, I declare to the Lord: "Father, I gratefully embrace all you want to give. I'm a spiritual beggar. I have nothing to offer other than my need of all that you are for me in Jesus. So glorify yourself by satisfying me wholly with you alone."

Because like one who aspires to *direct attention away from self to the Savior*, I say: "O God, yours is the glory; yours is the power; yours is the majesty alone!"

Because as the beloved of God, I say tenderly and intimately to the Lover of my soul: "***Abba, hold me. Protect me. Reveal your heart to me. I am yours! You are mine! Draw near and enable me to know and feel the affection in your heart for this one sinful soul.***"

For those many years when I kept my hands rigidly at my side or safely tucked away in the pockets of my pants, I knew that none would take notice of my praise of God or my prayers of desperation. No one would dare mistake me for a fanatic! I felt in control, dignified, sophisticated, and above all else, safe. These matter no more to me.

So, no, you need not raise your hands to worship God. But why wouldn't you want to?

Conclusion

I began today with the words from an Anglican marriage ceremony. It is there that I wish to conclude, and say to God in my praise and celebration and worship of him:

"My body will adore you, and [you alone] will I cherish. I will, with my body, declare your worth. . . . With my body, I thee honor."