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The Act and Object of Worship

Psalm 45

The impulse to worship is universal. If there is a race or tribe anywhere in the world that does not worship it has not been discovered. And yet the act of worship is, for the most part, so imperfect, so impure and so far astray that any teaching that might help us worship God more acceptably would indeed be a word well spoken.

The Act of Worship

There are ingredients that make up worship. One is admiration. We can admire without worshipping but we cannot worship without admiring, because worship is admiration carried to infinitude. In the same way, we can honor what we do not worship but we cannot worship the one we do not honor. So worship carries with it an ingredient of honor.

Then there is the spirit we call fascination. We can only worship that which fascinates us. The old poet said in an often-quoted passage, "In our astonished reverence, we confess Thy uncreated loveliness." There is an astonishment about reverence. If you can explain it, you cannot worship it. You may admire it, you may honor it, but there is a mysterious fascination that carries the heart beyond itself and then we are nearer to worship.

Another ingredient, which perhaps should have been mentioned first, is love. We can love without worshiping but we cannot worship without loving. Then love, when it lets itself go and no longer has any restraints, becomes adoration.

We need to refine our definitions. Such words as *honor*, *love* and *adore* don't mean what they are supposed to mean. We use divine language in such a common way that when we try to rise to the exalted and divine level we find ourselves using words that do not express anything. If I had the power, I would pass a law permitting the use of such words as *love*, *honor* and *adore* only in prayer, Bible teaching, preaching and song. We have spoiled them and made them common, yet they belong to God.

Worship seeks union with its beloved, and an active effort to close the gap between the heart and the God it adores is worship at its best.

The Object of Worship

The object of worship, of course, is God. The Nicene Creed says that we worship "one God, the

Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” That is who we worship. If we could set forth all God’s attributes and tell all that God is we would fall on our knees, undoubtedly, in adoring worship. It says in the Bible that He “dwells in light unapproachable whom no man can see or has seen or can see and live” (1 Timothy 6:16, Exodus 33:20, author’s paraphrase). It says that God is holy, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent and sovereign and that He has a thousand sovereign attributes. And all these should humble us and bring us down. I cannot accept with any sympathy the idea that we go to church to soothe ourselves and calm our spirits. We do calm our spirits and there is a soothing effect in worship, but the primary object of church attendance is not to relax—it is to offer worship, which belongs to God.

David sees this God incarnated in Psalm 45. He sees Him as God of the substance of His Father, born before the world was and made as the substance of his mother born in due time—a radiantly beautiful, romantic and winsome figure. And here are some adjectives he used to describe this man who is God and this God who became man: fair, kingly, gracious, majestic, true, meek, righteous, loving, glad and fragrant.

Certainly this is not the stern-browed Jupiter or Thor sitting in some high Olympus. Here is a fragrant, glad, loving, righteous, friendly God—yet majestic, “dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto” (1 Timothy 6:16), inspiring awe

in His enemies and terror in His foes. This is the God we adore. Here is the Lord, "Worship thou him" (Psalm 45:11).

Even announcing that we are going to preach about worship must start the wings of the seraphim in heaven to waving and the organs to playing, because heaven exists to worship God. The atmosphere and the very breezes that flow out of heaven are filled with divine worship.

The health of the world is worship. When intelligent, moral creatures are in tune in worship, we have the symphony of creation. But anywhere there is not worship, there is discord and broken strings. When all the full redeemed universe is back once more worshipping God in full voice, happily and willingly, then we will see the new creation—the new heaven and the new earth.

In the meantime you and I, belonging to another creation, are called upon to worship God. And it says, "He is thy Lord; and worship thou him" (Psalm 45:11).

Worship must be all—entire. By that I mean that the total life must worship God. The whole personality has to worship God or our worship is not perfect. Faith, love, obedience, loyalty, high conduct and life all must be taken as burnt offerings and offered to God. If there is anything in me that does not worship God, then there is nothing in me that worships God perfectly.

I would not go so far as to say that God will not accept anything less than perfect worship; if I did, I would rule myself out. We would all

hang “our harps on the willows” and refuse to “sing the LORD’s song in a strange land” (Psalm 137:2, 4). But the ideal God sets before us is that we should worship as near to perfectly as we can. And if there are areas in my being which are not harmonious and do not worship God then there is no area in my being that worships God perfectly.

There is a great delusion among religiously inclined people these days. We imagine that a sense of sublimity is worship. I happen to be reading, or trying to read, a book called *Nature Mysticism*, written by some old fellow with a doctor of divinity degree. I find it hard going—not because it’s profound, but because I don’t agree with it. He should have known better than to write that book. In it he talks about the sublime but he doesn’t talk about Jesus or God or the blood or the incarnation—only the sublime. We are supposed to walk out under the stars and feel a sense of sublimity like a crackpot poet, and that is supposed to be worship. I do not believe it.

A man—utterly corrupt, crawling with the maggots of iniquity—may feel a sense of sublimity when the great thunderstorm breaks on the mountain or when the sea in the storm booms on the shore or when the stars in their silver beauty shine at night. When you walk into a cathedral where bank upon bank of candles burn fitfully and where there are sections you can’t enter, that throws over some people a sense of awe and sublimity. Awe and sublimity are ingredients of

worship if the worship is there. But we can be awestruck and not worship God. We can sense the sublime and not be worshipping God.

There are poets whose faculties for the sublime were developed far beyond yours and mine. And yet they dared to write that there was no God. The Roman poet Lucretius, in his great work on the nature of things, launches into beautiful passages. He was a man in rapport with the universe, without any doubt. But he was flatly against belief in God or belief in any gods, although he was a Roman. A man who doesn't believe in God cannot worship God.

But some sissified mentality might say, "Now, just a minute, don't be so severe, dear brother. Maybe we worship God and don't know that we worship Him." If you take the Bible for it, we have to say such a thing is impossible. You cannot worship God when at the same time you do not believe He exists.

The sense of awe we feel in the presence of death, in the wonders of nature or in the silence of the night is natural, but it is not necessarily *spiritual*, though it can be. A man filled with the Spirit who has met God in a living encounter can worship God in the silence and in the storm. Spurgeon preached a great sermon on God in the silence and God in the storm. It's all true. The heart that knows God can find God everywhere. But the heart that doesn't know God can feel the emotions of nature worship without rising to spiritual worship at all.

I repeat that no worship is wholly pleasing to God till there is nothing in us displeasing God. If this disillusion anybody I do not apologize. Some of us need to be disillusioned so that we might get straightened out. A little boy may run around the house believing he's Hopalong Cassidy. He may do that up to the age of ten. But if he's eighteen and is still running around with a Hopalong Cassidy hat on, somebody needs to disillusion that boy. He doesn't need consolation—he needs to be disillusioned.

In the dawn of the race men worshiped the sun and the stars. They got down on their knees and prayed to the bushes and the trees and the mountain peaks. But we are not in the dawn of the race; we are at full maturity. Christianity and Judaism have been in the world now for thousands of years. Science and philosophy and education and progress have surely brought us to a point where at least we're able to know we are not Hopalong Cassidy. Even if we aren't Christians we ought to know that much. Instead of consoling men who believe they are worshiping God when they are not, we ought to disillusion them and show them they are not worshiping God acceptably.

No Magic Formula

Remember, there is no magic in faith or in names. You can name the name of Jesus a thousand times; but if you will not follow the nature of Jesus the name of Jesus will not mean anything to you. We cannot worship God and live after our

own nature. It is when God's nature and our nature begin to harmonize that the power of the name of God begins to operate within us. As it was said so quaintly of Samson that "the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times in the camp of Dan" (Judges 13:25), I believe that God's people ought to be moved at times to true worship. But we cannot pray toward the east and walk toward the west and then hope for harmony in our being. We cannot pray in love and live in hate and still think we are worshiping God.

Let us suppose we are back in the old days of the high priest, who took incense into the sanctum and went behind the veil and offered it there. And let us suppose that rubber—the worst-smelling thing I can think of when it burns—had been available in those days. Let us suppose that chips of rubber had been mixed with the incense, so that instead of the pure smoke of the spices filling the temple with sweet perfume, there had been the black, angry, rancid smell of rubber mixed with it. How could a priest worship God by mixing with the sweet-smelling ingredients some foul ingredient that would be a stench in the nostrils of priest and people?

So how can we worship God acceptably when there is within our nature something that, when it catches on fire, gives off not a *fragrance* but a *smell*? How can we hope to worship God acceptably when there is something in our nature which is undisciplined, uncorrected, unpurged, unpurified—which is evil and which will not

and cannot worship God acceptably? Even granted that a man with evil ingredients in his nature might with some part of him worship God half acceptably, what kind of a way is that to live?

Believe it or not, I would like to be decent and nice. If I could, I would join Norman Vincent Peale in thinking about roses and symphony orchestras. But I can't join the good brother. So I've got to tell you that if you do not worship God seven days a week, you do not worship Him on one day a week. There is no such thing known in heaven as Sunday worship unless it is accompanied by Monday worship and Tuesday worship and so on.

Too many of us discharge our obligations to God Almighty in one day, usually by a trip to church. Sometimes nobly we make it two trips to church. But it's all on the same day when we've nothing else to do—and that is supposed to be worship. I will grant that it *can be* true worship, provided on Monday and Saturday we were also worshipping God.

You don't need to be in church—you can worship God at your desk; you can worship God on an elevated train or driving in traffic; you can worship God washing dishes or ironing clothing; you can worship God in school or on the basketball court. You can worship God in whatever activities are legitimate and right and good; you need not be in church all the time. How could you be?

Our Lord Himself went to the synagogue or

the temple, as His custom was, on the Sabbath day. Other days He was a carpenter and worked and shaved and sawed and drove nails with His supposed father. Like the Jew He was, He went one day a week and worshiped. Certain other times He went for a whole eight days at a stretch. But He went only one day out of the week to worship in the temple.

We can go to church and worship. But if we go to church and worship one day it's not true worship unless it is followed by worship six days after that till the next Sabbath comes. We must never rest until everything inside us worships God.

I get on a spiritual plateau every once in a while, where I seem to have learned all I can learn and risen as high as I can go. My capacity is filled for the time being, and I don't make any progress; I beat the air. Then God does something for me and I reach a new level. I think I have reached a new level recently and I'd like to share it with you.

I have been thinking recently about how important my thoughts are. I don't have to *do* wrong to get under blistering conviction and repent. I can lose the fellowship of God and a sense of His presence and a sense of spirituality by just *thinking* wrong. God has been saying to me, "I dwell in your thoughts. Make your thoughts a sanctuary in which I can dwell. See to it." You can't do anything with your heart—that is too deep—but you can control your thoughts.

So I've been trying to make my thoughts right.

When I think of people who dislike me or whom I dislike, I have tried to think cheerfully and charitably about them, in order that God could dwell in my thoughts.

God won't dwell in spiteful thoughts, polluted thoughts, lustful thoughts, covetous thoughts or prideful thoughts. He will only dwell in meek, pure, charitable, clean and loving thoughts. He will dwell in positive thoughts—even aggressive, fighting thoughts, if need be—but they must be pure thoughts, thoughts that are like God's. God will dwell in them as a sanctuary.

Your theology is your foundation. The superstructure is your spiritual experience built on that foundation. But the high bell towers where the carillons are—those are your thoughts. And if you keep those thoughts pure the chimes can be heard ringing out “Holy, Holy, Holy” on the morning air.

Make your thoughts a sanctuary God can inhabit, and don't let any of the rest of your life dishonor God. See to it that not a foot of ground is unholy. See to it that every hour and every place is given over to God, and you will worship Him and He will accept it.

And the most beautiful thing is that He will be accepting your worship when you don't know it's rising to Him. He'll be smelling the incense of your high intention even when you are snowed under by the cares of this life—even when the telephone jangling and appointments to be made and people to see keep you from thinking about

Him. If God knows your intention is to worship Him with every part of your being, God will be smelling the incense of your holy intention even if the world for a time claims your legitimate interest.

We can attain to this by cooperating with God. On God's side is love, grace, atonement, promises, the Holy Ghost; on our side is determination, seeking, yielding, believing. And our hearts then become sanctuaries where a continuous, unbroken fellowship of communion and worship is rising to God all the time. Even when you are embroiled in earthly activities, at the same time your whole life can be a fragrant altar of worship that pleases God.