

Right Questions, Wrong Answers: A Study of World Religions • Lesson Seven •

How Am I to Worship God?

1. In spirit, not by formalistic ritual
2. In truth, confessing and praising the one true God

Worship

A meditation based on various passages from Colossians and Psalm 51*

Leader: As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Group: **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.**

Leader: Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

Group: **Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.**

Leader: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Group: **Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.**

Leader: And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Group: **Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.**

Leader: You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

Group: **The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.**

*Psalm 51:1-3,7-17; Colossians 3:12-17

Prayer: Gracious Lord God, our heavenly Father, you live in unapproachable light. Yet you graciously approach us and reveal yourself to us in your Holy Word. Help us know your great love for us and your vigilance for our souls that we might continually offer you the sacrifice of lips that praise your holy name. Preserve us from heartless formalism and mindless ritual, and enable us to offer you the worship you are worthy to receive. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Suppose one Sunday you were to stand at the doors of your church, with clipboard in hand, to interview everyone who entered. And suppose that everyone gave an honest answer to this question: Why are you coming here today? What responses do you think you would find on your clipboard?

Answers might include: I’m here to worship God. I’ve come to hear the Word of God and learn more about God. I’m here because this is what I do on Sunday morning. God wants me to be here. I had a long week, and I’m looking for some peace. I’m searching for the truth. (This is by no means a definitive list.)

In today’s study, we will think about the reasons Christians worship and contrast that with the reasons why members of other religions worship.

Studying God’s Word

In spirit, not by formalistic ritual

Read Colossians 2:13-23.

1. We have good reason to worship God from the heart. What reasons can you find in verses 13-15?

(1) He made us spiritually alive. We couldn’t have worshiped him when we were spiritually dead. (2) He forgave us *all* our sins. (3) He took our sins to the cross and gave up his life for us there, that we might have eternal life free of charge. (4) Jesus triumphed over the devil and disarmed him. He has conquered death and the devil, and we have the benefits of that victory. These are all reasons for us to worship God spontaneously from the heart.

2. What false attitude concerning worship does Paul address in verse 16?

Some contend that worship is intimately tied to certain ritualistic observances and a certain diet. Paul rejects that idea.

3. In verse 18 Paul refers to people who delight in false humility and the worship of angels. Obviously these people were very spiritual, but also very misguided. To join in their worship would rob Christians of their faith (disqualify them for the prize). Why are false humility and the worship of angels dangerous to faith?

The people were proposing a higher level of spirituality than the one Christians had. They claimed to see angels and made Christians wonder about the validity of their faith. The non-Christians’ humility was outward, designed to gain praise for themselves. It did not flow from a true understanding of their sin or from respect for God’s glory. But it resulted in making Christians wonder if their own humility was deep enough. Both of these types of false worship led Christians away from Christ. This verse is very important when we think about other religions.

4. What is the inevitable result of worship that is heavy on ritual and the observance of rules? (verse 19)

People lose connection with the Lord Jesus, the head of the church. They lose true worship, which is to be a heartfelt response to the grace of God in Christ. Ultimately, they die, because there is no connection to Jesus, from whom life comes.

5. What separates spiritual worship from ritual and formalism? (verses 20-22)

Ritual is the world’s idea of religion; spiritual worship is Christ’s design. Ritual is based on human commands; spiritual worship flows from thanks to God for making us alive in Christ. Ritual worship soon perishes, accomplishing nothing of value.

Spiritual worship redounds to God’s glory forever. Ritual worship feels more spiritual. It feels like a larger sacrifice. It appeals to the old Adam, which wants to feel that it is earning God’s favor and blessing. All people are born with the idea that they must please God with the things that they do, so they often devise their own ways and methods of doing so. When God’s design for worship from the heart seems too simple, they add to it with dietary restrictions and rituals of humility.

What is the goal of worship in other religions?

Islam: Individual and corporate worship is intended to praise Allah, to connect the individual to the community of the faithful, and to pile up enough good works so that the scales weigh in the individual’s favor on the day of judgment.

Judaism: Individual and corporate worship is designed to glorify the Lord and to connect the individual with the community. It is also a means of gaining God’s favor.

Hinduism: Worship is less corporate, more personal. The worship of a particular deity is but the means to an end. Worshipers hope, through it, to release themselves from the cycle of reincarnation.

Buddhism: Strict Buddhists meditate in order to detach themselves from the desires of the world and hopefully to extinguish those desires. In so doing, they hope to experience nirvana.

His Word in My Life

Your Muslim friend thinks Christians “do church” one day a week and forget about it the rest of the week. He prays five times a day in the direction of Mecca, “the holy city.” He prays when he gets up in the morning, at noon, in midafternoon, after sunset, and before going to bed. He even uses prescribed words and postures for each of those prayers. To fail to say those prayers at those times is to fail to please Allah.

1. How would you respond to your friend’s charge against Christians? How might you use it as a point of contact to share the gospel of Jesus with him?

Maybe it’s true that some Christians act as if Sunday has nothing to do with the rest of the week. Maybe some Christians forget to live thankful lives to God’s glory Monday through Saturday. However, just because Christians don’t follow prescribed rules for worship and prayer doesn’t mean that they are not praying or worshipping.

Maybe your Muslim friend is bothered by his failure to focus during prayers or his omission of some prayers. This would be an excellent opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus, the perfect substitute. Jesus always worshiped God. He went to the cross and was punished for our sins of failing to worship God perfectly. He has freed us from the idea that we must follow certain rituals of worship in order to please him.

2. What would you say about his practice of prayer five times a day with set words and set postures?

It appears to be a higher form of worship, but it remains a worship that is not based on truth. It easily lends itself to formalistic ritual.

3. List some ways in which we may fall prey to formalistic ritual worship.

Prayers before and after meals can become so much of a ritual that we say the words without even thinking about them. The same may be true of our recitation of the Lord’s Prayer at church or at home. We may go through the motions during a worship service, mouthing the words but giving very little thought to their meaning. Perhaps we give our offerings without considering the reason to give. Going to church on Sunday because it’s the thing to do is another example of falling prey to formalistic ritual worship.

His Word in My Life

Because the Lord God himself established the Sabbath Day as a day of rest for his people, your Jewish coworker will not work on Saturday (except to go to the synagogue and read the Torah).

1. Why don’t we gather for worship on Saturday and follow strict rules for rest like Jewish people do?

We don’t follow the Sabbath rules. Those laws were given to the Israelites to point them to Christ. The physical rest they experienced on the Sabbath was to lead them to consider the spiritual rest that the Messiah would bring. The Lord Jesus accomplished that spiritual rest through his life and death. He won forgiveness for all. We find spiritual rest in the knowledge that we have been declared righteous by God and are heirs of life everlasting.

2. How might you use this as a means of sharing the gospel of Jesus with your Jewish coworker?

In a loving and tactful way, talk about true rest. True rest is found not through external observance of a day, nor through cessation of physical activity, but in the Lord Jesus. Only in the Lord Jesus can we find rest from the guilt of our sin. There is no need to find peace or certainty in ritual or practice, because the Sabbath has been fulfilled.

So much that is called worship in our day is nothing more than following man-made rituals. God desires to be worshiped in spirit, not by means of formalistic ritual. Worship that arises from hearts filled with thanksgiving for all that he has done for us—that’s the worship God desires.

In truth, confessing and praising the one true God

Read Acts 17:16-31.

1. The apostle Paul explains that worship directed toward anything but the Lord of heaven and earth is false worship. How does he point that out? (verses 16-18)

Paul was “greatly distressed” by the number of false idols in Athens, because he knew that false gods could not save and because he knew that the one true God was not receiving the honor he deserved.

2. Paul does not find it necessary to chastise the people of Athens for their heartless worship. What major omission does he find in their worship? (verses 22 and 23)

They did not know the true God. They were religious, but their religiosity was pointless. Since they didn’t know the true object of worship, their worship would always fall short of pleasing God.

3. Early in his address, Paul reveals several things about the one true God. What does he say that makes it clear that the Lord is the only one worthy of worship? (verses 24-28)

(1) He made heaven and earth and all that is in it. The almighty Creator alone is worthy of worship (verse 24). (2) He does not live in temples. He is above and beyond the limitations of space and time. As such, he is certainly worthy of worship (verse 24). (3) He is totally independent, needing no one and nothing to be complete (verse 25). (4) He gives life and breath to all human beings, preserving his creation (verse 25). (5) He rules over all things, directing everything for the good of his people (verse 26). (6) He loves souls so much that he is willing to let himself be known and found (verse 27). (7) Human beings are totally dependent on him for everything (verse 28).

4. How does Paul demonstrate the foolishness of thinking that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone? (verse 29)

We are God’s offspring, as even the unbelieving poets recognized. If God were gold or silver or stone, some human being would have had to make God. “If God made us, how can something we make be God?” is the question that Paul poses to his listeners. Since God is the Creator, he cannot be created.

5. What will happen to sincerely religious people who worship false gods with all their hearts? (verse 31)

God will judge them on the Last Day by his Son. Though they may have sworn off all formalistic ritual and sought after the truth, they will not survive if they didn’t see the Lord Jesus as their Savior. Those who reject the Son as Savior will meet him on the Last Day as judge. And their false gods will be powerless to help them, no matter how earnestly they worshiped during their earthly lives.

What are some worship practices of non-Christian religions?

Islam: A Muslim’s daily worship is marked by prayer at fixed hours. Prayers are spoken facing Mecca, five times each day, preceded by ritual washing: upon rising, at noon, midafternoon, after sunset, and before retiring. These prayers remind the Muslim of his status before Allah as a worshipful servant. Corporate worship takes place in a mosque (a place for prostration before God) and is led by a member of the congregation. On Friday the whole male community should be present for prayer. Near the end of the month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, on the Night of Power, Muslims commemorate the descent of the Koran from heaven and the beginning of Muhammad’s ministry.

Judaism: Men wear phylacteries on their arms, in which passages of Scripture are placed. Services are held on Saturday in a synagogue or temple. (Reform Jews gather in a temple, Orthodox and Conservative Jews in a synagogue.) Conforming Jews abstain from work on this day. The most prominent feature of a synagogue is the “ark” set against the wall facing toward Jerusalem. The ark contains the scrolls of the Law. Male worshipers usually cover their heads. Festivals play a large role in the worship life of Judaism: The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) is the holiest day in the Jewish year. It is a day of prayer, fasting, and confession of sin, leading to a spiritual rebirth.

Hinduism: Worship is primarily individual rather than corporate, even in temples. Many people seldom visit a temple, worshipping instead in the home. Many set aside a room for worship, with a shrine containing an image of a favorite deity. Early morning worship begins with the mantra “Om” and continues with the naming of their god. Then the worshipers say, “Let us meditate upon the adorable light of the radiant sun; may he stimulate our intellects.” They sit cross-legged on the ground, with their eyes looking at the tip of their noses, and they face the rising sun. They sip water and sprinkle water around their seats. They touch six parts of the body—an indication of the God within—meditate, and repeat the mantra. Some light incense and offer food to the deity. Many show respect for the cow by eating only vegetables.

Buddhism: The ideal way to practice Buddhism is to live a monastic life and to refrain from the worship of a god. The strict Buddhist is skeptical of the value of rites and ceremonies, thinking that the practices tie a person to this existence. The common Buddhist, though, makes sacrifices and presents gifts (food, flowers, money) to Buddha and says prayers before an altar. The goddess Tera is worshiped as the mother of Buddha. Worship tends to be primarily individual, even in temples. The practice of meditation is aided by the repetition of a mantra. A common object used in Buddhist worship is a prayer wheel, which sends prayer messages to Buddha when it is spun.

His Word in My Life

Buddhism, with its rejection of much that we would label formalistic ritual and its emphasis on personal meditation, might seem to be truer worship than what we offer in our liturgical services.

If our liturgy may lead to mere rote repetition, why do we continue to use it?

The main reason to preserve a liturgical form is to maintain the emphasis on what Christ has done for us. It helps us to worship in truth. It fixes our attention on the one true God, who has given us life. There is nothing more spiritually valuable for us than to consider what Christ has done for us sinful creatures. Nothing could be better than hearing again and again the truth that full and free forgiveness is ours in Christ. Nothing could be more appropriate than to respond with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. This is not to say that liturgy ought to be exalted to the level of law. It is simply a helpful tool for worshiping God in truth. Of course, we must make an effort not to let it degenerate into mindless repetition.

His Word in My Life

If someone were to accuse you of formalistic ritual in worship because your church is liturgical, you would defend yourself. “How can you see into my heart?” you might say. A Muslim might make the same claim to you about his ritual prayers to Allah.

What larger problem remains with the Muslim’s worship?

Worship that is not directed toward the one true God is false, regardless of how sincere it may be. God wants people to worship him in spirit and in truth.

As children of God, we want nothing more than to please God with our worship. Rote worship doesn’t please him. We know that. Even heartfelt worship, if it is not based on the truth, fails to meet the mark. God-pleasing worship revolves around, and is anchored on, God’s revelation of himself in his Word. Praising the God of the Bible, the one who became man to redeem all people from the guilt of their sin, is true and God-pleasing worship.

Summary

Ultimately, worship is a matter of the heart. Only when the heart is right can the worship be right; only when the heart pleases God can the worship please God. So where can we get such hearts? The teachings of other religions cannot lead to true worship because they do not lead to the God of mercy in Christ. God himself, through the gospel of Jesus Christ, fills our hearts with praise and thanksgiving and leads us in spiritual worship. What a beautiful thing!

Life with God

Day 1: Read through one of the liturgies used in the worship service. Ask yourself, “What are we doing at this point in the service?” and “Why are we doing it at this point?”

Day 2: Read Genesis 4:1-16. The Lord was pleased with Abel’s worship because it came from a thankful heart.

Day 3: Read Romans 12:1-8. Offering yourself to God in response to his grace is true spiritual worship.

Day 4: Read John 4:1-26. Jesus talks with the woman at the well about the worshipers God seeks.

Day 5: Read Malachi 1:6-14. The Lord is not interested in halfhearted worship; it is no worship at all.

Day 6: Read 1 Kings 18:16-45. Worship that is not directed toward the one true God, no matter how sincere, does not please God.