

It Is Written

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The Search For True Worshipers

by Steven Harper

When Jesus traveled from Judea to Galilee (John 4:3, 4), He passed through the region of Samaria; He would do the same on another return trip to Jerusalem from Galilee (cf. Luke 9:51ff). This is something some Jews would not lower themselves to do, having such a low view of Samaritans; they would cross over the Jordan and travel up through the region of Decapolis on the eastern side of the river, crossing back over to enter Galilee once past Samaria. But Jesus did many things that the self-righteous ones would not dare do.

And as He passed through Samaria on this occasion, He stopped at the village of Sychar, where Jacob's well was located (John 4:5, 6). While there, a woman of the village came and Jesus requested, "Give Me a drink" (John 4:7). The woman was evidently surprised at the request and asked Jesus, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" because, as John adds, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:9).

This simple request led to a conversation in which Jesus revealed Himself to be a prophet by what He told the woman about herself (John 4:10-19), so she put forth the current beliefs and practices of the Samaritans and the Jews, waiting for His reply: "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship" (John 4:20). Jesus then told her that the time was coming when it wouldn't matter where men worshiped God, and revealed, "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-24).

I find this to be an extremely important passage in the Bible, because it tells us plainly what God is looking for or, more importantly, for who God is looking. What we find is, God is searching for "true worshipers." But what does that mean? He answers this within the context, so let us consider that today and, in so doing, we can learn whether or not we are the kind of people God seeks!

The Desire of God. Before we even get to who God seeks, let's stop and consider the fact that God is seeking something or, more properly, someone. The original Greek word indicates this is His desire; that is, this is what He wants. This being true, anyone whose aim in life is learning what pleases the Lord, and then doing that, should be paying close attention. He is about to tell us what God really wants! And what He wants is:

True Worshipers. The first thing we should note here is that Jesus said God is seeking "true worshipers," which indicates that there is such thing as false worshipers, or fake worshipers. Those would be the ones who would pray to be seen of men (Matt. 6:5), or maybe those who worshiped the Lord only with their lips, while their hearts were far from Him (Matt. 15:8, 9). Maybe it is like the ones who would offer their children as sacrifices to the false gods and, on the same day, enter into His sanctuary to offer worship (Ezek. 23:36-39). Fake worship brings no praise from God because it is fake! God is not actually loved or honored or exalted in fake worship. The fake worshiper might feel better about himself as he is offering up the fake worship, and maybe afterwards, but God is not pleased.

Today, it might be a crowd that sings loudly to the sounds of a pulsing rock band who are powerfully singing how much they love Jesus or how exalted He is; or it might be a middle-aged couple who are merely mouthing the words to a song they've sung a hundred times before, but not with any real feeling or conviction. It might be a congregation that is overflowing with emotional outbursts, shouting, and running down the aisles in a frenzy; or it could be a quiet congregation who always shows up on time, sings their four songs, partakes of the communion with solemnness, and listens to the dry sermon, going through the motions.

The reality is, we can offer up fake worship in a thousand different ways, and human observers might not be able to distinguish the fake from the true. But God can tell the difference, because He looks into the hearts of worshipers, rather than looking at the outward offerings. You see, that is the difference between fake and true worship!

In Spirit. The Jews were good at offering up superficial worship; as noted earlier, Jesus condemned them for honoring God with their lips, while their hearts were far from Him (cf. Matt. 15:8, 9). The hypocrite was the one who offered up prayers to God only to be seen of men (cf. Matt. 6:5). Neither of these ones offered what they did from the inner man, but merely outward, visible acts that were no deeper than what could be seen with the eye.

God wants worshipers to worship Him from the heart. He wants worship that is an act of intellectual conviction and motivated by one's emotional connection. It is the one who truly loves the Lord with all the heart, soul, and mind (cf. Matt. 22:37) who will offer up worship from the heart. It is the one who loves God because he understands God loved him first (1 John 4:19), and desires to express that love for God through true worship — from the inner man, not just from the lips. True worship is not merely doing what we see others do, but a matter of expressing true love and devotion to God through our words and deeds, but which began in our hearts.

In Truth. The original Greek word here is (*aletheia*), which means "that candour of mind which is free from affection, pretence, simulation, falsehood, deceit" [Thayer's]. In simple terms, it is unfeigned worship; it is not faked, insincere, or artificial. In other words, God doesn't want worship that is offered only in ways that appear to be sincere; He wants us to mean what we say and do when we offer up our worship.

To help understand what this means, consider how the same word is used in another context. John wrote the early disciples to show them that we demonstrate our love for one another by helping one another when we see the need (1 John 3:17). His admonition is, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18). In other words, we can't just say we love one another when we really do not; we can't just say we love one another and then not help one another in time of need. We must truthfully love one another, and to the point that, when we see that need, we don't even have to stop to think about whether we will help or not; we will just do it because the love is unfeigned.

God doesn't want fake worship because, in reality, it originates from fake love; it is not real. But when we truly love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind, we will express that genuine love with true worship and devotion. We will want to express our love for God and what He has done for us. And — here's the important thing — it is exactly what the Lord desires from us.

The psalmist wrote in his prayer to the Lord, "Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts" (Psa. 51:6). Let us each examine self and the worship we offer to the Lord. Is it from the heart? Is it real? God knows, so let us not fool ourselves.