

Loving God Supremely

Psalm 84

1) Marva Dawn is a Christian professor and author from the state of Washington. She has written a book titled, *A Royal "Waste" of Time*. In it she says that worship is a royal waste of time – in the world's eyes. After all, there are so many more productive uses we could have for this hour. We could do an extra hour of work, for example, and make more money. We could go for a jog or play some golf and get some exercise. We could be at home taking a nap or sleeping late. We could be leisurely reading the Sunday morning paper with a second cup of coffee, or taking part in some on-line game on the computer.

a. But we're not. We're not doing any of those things. What are we doing instead? Well, we're just sitting here in a room together, singing some songs, listening to some music, reading from a book, and hearing folks talk and pray.

b. Why are we here? Well, we're here, Marva Dawn says, because we believe God is God. God is great, and God is good. And accordingly, God deserves to be worshiped. God deserves to be offered our gratitude. That's why we're here. We're here because God is good, and worship is one way that we show our love for God.

2) What is the purpose of worship? Jesus stated succinctly the most important commandment.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37)

Worship is an expression of our love for God. The purpose of worship is loving God, and we can't love God without loving one another.

a. The word "worship" originated from words meaning worthiness, respect, reverence. Worship is acknowledging that God alone is of ultimate worth as the source and goal of human life. Worship is a gift of respect to the God whom we worship.

b. There are moments in the life of faith in which we want to know more about God, but in worship we strive to experience God – to know the God revealed in Jesus.

- We want to experience God and know that in the midst of all the blessed and tragic that occur in our world that at least we are not alone.

c. We worship a God who cares for us as well as a God who wants good for us. Christian people need a weekly reminder that we live in God's world and that we are God's people. Worship is a ritual in which we reenact our salvation and retell our story of faith.

3) Our reading from the book of Psalms today gives us a picture of somebody who just loves church, or, more specifically, loves worship.

"How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord."

(Psalm 84:1, 2a)

a. The imagery is as clear as it is intense. And, it gets even more amazing than that. He says,

"A single day in your courts is better than a thousand anywhere else!" (Psalm 84:10a)

Think about that the next time you wonder if you have an hour to worship this week. Here is a man who would trade a thousand days anywhere else for just one day in church!

b. But, the psalmist doesn't just want to be present in bodily form in the Temple; He wants a fresh experience with God.

"My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God."

(Psalm 84:2b)

No person ever wanted God who did not possess Him, and the measure of our desire is the determination of our possession. To some, worship becomes so perfunctory and lifeless that it becomes little more than a trip to the filling station. But, not this man! He sings,

"Blessed are those whose strength is in you."

"Blessed is the man who trusts in you." (Psalm 84:5a, 12b)

The heart of religion always has been trust in God.

4) The question now becomes, "How do we give God the worship He deserves?" It should not be a surprise that Jesus would give us the definitive word on worship.

"A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:23-24)

a. The context for Jesus' teaching on worship is a Samaritan woman who has met the Lord at the well. In that meeting, Jesus shows her her sin. So, like any squirming sinner under the conviction of God, she changes the subject. And she begins to talk about the "worship wars" of her day.

"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." (John 4:20)

b. Today, people argue about traditional versus contemporary worship style, or liturgy versus spontaneous, about instruments or no instruments, and so forth. I have read and studied and listened to many people talk about worship, and I must say that much of it sounds like this woman at the well – it misses the point.

It is amazing to me how worship has changed since I first began in the ministry over 40 years ago. If someone would have taken me aside then, and revealed to me that in the future I would be worshipping with a praise band, guitars, and drums, I would have thought – "My goodness, I must have become a Pentecostal!" But, I love it. I really do! I think we are much more free to worship God than we were 40 years ago. We're not as uptight as we used to be, fearing what someone might think.

c. Let me add this, though. I don't care if it is Gregorian chant, Johann Sebastian Bach, Fanny Crosby, Bill Gaither, or the latest praise number still wet from printing – if God isn't in it – it's just noise!

5) That's why Jesus teaches about vibrant, "spirit and truth" worship, and He even uses the phrase "true worshipers," indicating that there is a true worship and a false worship. The difference between a biblical and a pagan understanding of worship is this – it's the difference between a verb and a noun. For the person of the Bible, worship is something you do. For the pagan, worship is a state of being.

a. Even in the Church, in our culture there is a notion that worship should be entertaining. The people come to be pumped up and enthused about all the good things God is doing for them.

b. Let me tell you something – worship is about God; it's not about us. It is centered in the Person of Jesus, not some prop or lack thereof. It happens in the context of real life events, which happened or are happening under the direction of God. We cannot worship outside of the story of what God has done and is doing in history.

c. Christ is the center of Christian worship. Not the preacher, not us, not our experience. We are not here to get, but to give. The question we should be asking ourselves on the way home is not --

- What did I get out of this? or
- How did the preacher do? but
- How did I do?

d. For when all the anthems have been sung, and the sermons have been preached, all that will have mattered is that we have said with our whole being:

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12)

6) Our focus today is "passionate worship." Not sleepy worship. Not half dead in the pew worship, but passionate worship. We come to this place to celebrate the goodness of God. We come to this place to proclaim the greatness of our God. That's something we should be passionate about.

a. John Wesley gave instruction to the early Methodists on many things, including how to sing the hymns. You can find Wesley's "Directions for Singing" from 1761 on page vii in our United Methodist Hymnal. He urged Methodists to

"sing lustily and with good courage. Be aware of singing as if you are half dead or half asleep, but lift up your voice in strength . . . Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature."

The way we sing, pray, welcome others, receive the sacraments as sign and symbols of grace – offers clues to whether our worship is passionate for God – or not.

b. A major part of experiencing passionate worship is having high expectations for it – to have real and sincere expectations that God will be here, and move among us in worship, and draw us closer to God and to each other, and to stretch us. This is one of the keys to experience sincere and meaningful worship – to believe and actually to expect something good and positive to happen during worship – not simply to sing the songs, and pray the prayers as important as those are – but to expect God to be at work through those songs and prayers and words to cause actual lives to change.

Understanding worship in that way means worship helps to shape us, helps us to realize who we are, and who we were meant to be. True worship – passionate worship changes us!

7) There's a wonderful story from the Fillmore Street Presbyterian Church in Corinth, Mississippi back in the 1960s. This church had been in Corinth since the early 1800s. It had been a church with a great history, but times had changed, and demographics had changed, and the Fillmore Street Presbyterian Church had dwindled and dwindled. Sometime in the 1960s, the congregation made the decision that they couldn't go on any longer, and they would transfer to some other church, and they would close the church.

It was a hard decision to make, but they made it, and they then decided that they needed a big last day at the church. It would be partly a funeral; it would be partly a wake; and it would be partly a "clean out the closets of the old church" day. The people could come and take a hymnal, or a Bible, or something as a souvenir, or a memento of their lives in that congregation.

Down in the basement there were old closets and holes in the wall. As they were cleaning out an old closet – almost a cave – in the basement, they were startled to discover tons and tons of Confederate ammunition. It seems that during the Battle of Shiloh, the confederate armies had used the basement of that church as an ammunition depot, and for over one hundred years, the people of the Fillmore Street Presbyterian Church had been singing, and praying, and breaking bread, and drinking wine over enough ordinance to blow up the whole town and they didn't even know it was there.

There's that kind of power when the people of God come together. If you don't know it, it's explosive here. For this is a place where people gather in joy and thanksgiving as people who are full of hope. We stop our mumbling and our down-in-the-mouth bickering and complaining, because God is great and God is good.

We say and sing it like we mean it – with feeling – because we love Him supremely.