

Worship in Spirit and Truth: John 4:16-26
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Last Sunday we began looking at this intriguing account of Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well. We're not told her name, so we just refer to her as the woman at the well or the Samaritan woman. We don't know a whole lot about her, but Jesus knew everything about her. What little we do know about her, we might be tempted to use as reason to avoid her, to shun her, to exclude her from our little circle of friends. But Jesus, knowing everything about her, knowing that she was a Samaritan (and Jews and Samaritans typically avoided each other), knowing all the skeletons in her closet, knowing the failed relationships, . . . Jesus, knowing all this, sought out this hurting woman. He cared about her. He wanted to give her living water.

In this we ought to see Jesus' love for sinners such as you and me. You and I are the woman in this story. The very one we might be prone to judge, that's me, that's you. We're the ones whose life stories are fraught with sinful actions and attitudes that have taken their toll in various relationships with others, and most destructively have kept us from God. But the hopeful message here is that living water is offered to all who will receive it. We're all craving satisfaction for our souls, and we tend to look for it in all the wrong places. But if we receive this gracious offer from Jesus, our thirsty souls will be quenched for all eternity.

Don't Hide Your Sins from Jesus

My first point this morning is, Don't hide your sins from Jesus. That's what we see this woman doing as the conversation progresses. At the end of the passage we studied last week, we noticed that it hasn't yet registered with this woman what Jesus is really talking about. She's still thinking on the physical level, and therefore she's confused by Jesus' talk of living water. Like Nicodemus being confused by Jesus' talk of a new birth. He asked how a man could enter a second time into his mother's womb. This woman, in verse 15, gives evidence of a similar confusion. She's just thinking of the water in the well and thinking it would be most convenient if she didn't have to walk to get water all the time.

That's where the conversation is at in verse 15, where left it last week. In verse 16 Jesus gets very personal, painfully so. He asks this woman a question that touches a terribly uncomfortable aspect of her life. This is surely an open wound in her heart. It reveals the unquenched thirst in her soul. And Jesus makes this statement in a way to give her an opportunity to share about her

sin, to share about her heartache, to share about her need. For here is Jesus, the One who meets all our needs.

She's still thinking on the surface level of the need for physical water. Jesus points to the need for living, spiritual water. But the woman doesn't want to go there. She's still blind to the gift Jesus is offering. She doesn't yet see who He is or what He can do for her. So she tries to put an end to that uncomfortable topic by simply replying, "I have no husband." Her statement is true so far as it goes. But she sure is hiding a lot! If she was talking to anyone else, that might have been sufficient to redirect the conversation. But not with Jesus. Jesus is graciously seeking her. He knows everything about her. And He is determined to show her that 1) she has a great spiritual thirst and 2) that He is only One who can quench that thirst.

Jesus' next statement, in verse 17, shows His divine knowledge. He recognizes that what she has said is technically correct, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband.'" But then Jesus goes to the painful realities she was trying to keep from Him. "For you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband." We don't know the details of each of those relationships. Of those 5 husbands, maybe some had died and left her a widow. Maybe others ended in divorce. But then there's the relationship she's in now, which is immoral because she's apparently living with a man who is not her husband.

We should note a couple things about that. First, it is wrong and sinful for a man and woman to be together enjoying the privileges of marriage if they're not married. Living together, sleeping together, that is for after you've made a covenant before God and others that you are committed to one another in marriage. The wedding needs to come first. Then you can be together, sleep together, live together. There is something very special in God's eyes about the covenant of marriage, and couples will find much joy and blessing in following God's guidelines for this wonderful thing He created. Don't listen to the world which says you need to live together before marriage, you need to sleep together before marriage. Just look at all the relational pain and misery in the world. Do you think they have it figured out!? I don't think so! God created sex and marriage. I think we should listen to Him. His Word, the Bible, has plenty to say about it. I'd be happy to share more with you if you're not familiar with the many passages in Scripture that address these issues. Or you can look up on our website sermons on marriage.

The other thing we should note about this interaction, specifically about marriage, is that Jesus is coming to this woman with hope and healing. She's living in sin, yes. But Jesus' intention is not merely to point that out. He wants her to recognize

her need so that she'll receive from Him living water welling up to eternal life. He wants her to acknowledge her sin and brokenness so that she can be forgiven and made whole.

So we see His divine knowledge and His merciful pursuit of her in pointing out to her the broken relationships of her past and the sinful relationship she's currently involved in. She's never met Him before, but He knows all about her. Later in the story we see that she gets it, and apparently she's received the living water from Jesus. And she shares the good news with others saying, in verse 29, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" We see that eventually she lets down her guard. But in verses 17 and following the walls are still up. She's not wanting to divulge anything.

Even after Jesus divulges everything, she's still reluctant to talk about her sin. Her first strategy was to say no more than she had to. "I have no husband." And then, when confronted with the divine omniscience of Jesus, her second strategy is to change the subject to theology. Do you see this in verses 19-20? "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. [Yes, indeed! More than she she realizes. He's much more than a prophet. He's the Messiah.] [And then here's the theological debate she tries to start] Our fathers worshiped on this mountain [Remember they're in Sychar in Samaria at Jacob's well, as mentioned earlier in verses 5-6. And Mount Gerizim would have been within view from that location. So it's like she's pointing up to Mount Gerizim saying, Our fathers worshiped on this mountain.] But you [the Jews] say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." She realizes she can't hide her sin from Jesus, so she tries to redirect the discussion to something else. Let's get into a debate about worship so I don't have to talk about my shameful past. She assumes Jesus, being a Jew, will be passionate about this long debated question which was part of the tension between Jews and Samaritans, which I explained some last time. The Samaritans only recognized the Pentateuch as Scripture (the first 5 books of the Old Testament). And they believed Mount Gerizim was the place for worship, not Jerusalem.

If it was someone other than Jesus, they might have taken the bait, gotten on their soapbox, and started a long monologue about why Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship. Or another type of person might have seen what was happening and said, "Hey, wait a minute, you're changing the subject. We're talking about your husbands. I'm not going to let you off the hook that easy."

Jesus didn't do either of those things. He didn't give a long discourse about Jerusalem. Nor did He press further the issue of

this woman's broken relationships. What He did is talk about true worship. He went to the heart of what worship is.

Jesus didn't press the personal details of her story. He graciously allowed her to change the subject. He lets her off the hook in one sense, but not in another. By responding to her question which was intended to change the subject, He really presses into the most important matter of all – true worship. And that's going to be the focus of the second half of the sermon.

But before we go there, let's just reflect a bit further on this first point – don't hide your sins from Jesus. Because hiding your sin from Jesus is what false worship does. It's what empty, vain worship does. Pretending to be better than you are, avoiding the penetrating questions of Jesus, but then also missing out on the liberating forgiveness of Jesus as long as you're unwilling to humble yourself before Him.

Our Old Testament reading this morning, from Psalm 51, is such a good model for us in not hiding our sin. These are King David's words after Nathan has confronted him about his sin with Bathsheba. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged for Bathsheba's husband to die in battle. In that story, like in the story of the woman at the well, we learn that God has a design for marriage. There is right and wrong when it comes to romance and sex and marriage. It was clearly sinful and wrong for David to sex with someone else's wife. And there were consequences to his sinful behavior. But the other thing we learn in both stories is that God forgives those who humbly repent and come to Him with a contrite heart. The Father is seeking, the Son is seeking, seeking hurting needy people who will look to Him for living water.

Listen again to some of these verses from Psalm 51. Many of these lines would have been just the right response of the woman at the well. When Jesus said, "Go, call your husband, and come here," she would have done well to openly confess her sins to Jesus. We, too, would do well to openly and humbly confess our sins to Him. So I would encourage you to make this the prayer of your heart this morning, because all who confess their sin and trust in Jesus will be saved. The Good News is that Jesus died in our place, taking the penalty for our sin, so that we can be forgiven. That forgiveness comes to those who repent and believe. Here are David's words from Psalm 51.

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in

your judgment.” (Psalm 51:1–4, ESV) “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” (Psalm 51:10–12, ESV) “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Psalm 51:16–17, ESV)

And that leads to our next points about the nature of true worship.

Worship a Person Not a Place

The woman at the well raised the question about the place of worship. Verse 20, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain [referring to Mount Gerizim], but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” But Jesus responded by saying it’s not really about the place. It’s about a Person. And Jesus, Himself, is that Person. He says in verse 21, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.” And then He draws a distinction between the Samaritans and the Jews, in verse 22. “You worship what you do not know.” Remember, the Samaritans rejected most of the Old Testament. So their worship was ill-informed. Their knowledge of God was not what the Jews had. Jesus goes on to say, “we [meaning the Jews] worship what we know, for salvation comes from the Jews.” The Messiah, Jesus Christ, is a Jew. The One who brings salvation is a Jew.

This connects with verses 25-26 where Jesus identifies Himself as the Messiah. The Samaritan woman was missing a lot of Old Testament knowledge, but she did understand that the Messiah was coming. That’s what she says in verse 25, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” And Jesus responded, “I who speak to you am he.” I’m the One. I’m the Messiah, standing right here before you.

Remember in John 2 where we studied that passage about Jesus clearing the temple? What was the point of that? The point is that Jesus is the temple! When He said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” and they were confused and angry at that statement. But He wasn’t talking about the physical building. He was talking about Himself. Worship is not about a place. It’s not about Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem or the physical temple in Jerusalem. It’s not about a building. It’s certainly not about 1028 Chartiers Ave. It’s about a Person. It’s about Jesus Christ. Worship a Person not a place.

Worship in spirit and truth

In verses 23-24 Jesus explains further, “But the hour is coming, and is now here [meaning Jesus has already arrived and His death and resurrection are close at hand], when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit [simply meaning that God is a spiritual Being], and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

The statement that God is spirit and the statement that true worshipers worship in spirit . . . I believe is making the basic point that worship is spiritual. It is far deeper than physical actions, physical buildings, locations, rituals, words coming out of your mouth, prayers that are said out loud, songs that are sung. Worship is not really about these outward things. It is essentially spiritual. Worship can and must overflow in many ways that involve outward actions. But it’s far deeper than those outward actions.

We have to be aware that there is such a thing as vain worship. There is false worship. There is going-through-the-motions worship, which is not really worship. It’s not true worship. Here’s the thing: 2 individuals could be right next to one another in a pew, singing the same songs about Jesus, following along during the Scripture reading, bowing their heads during the prayer, listening to the same sermon, partaking of the Lord’s Supper, writing a check for the same amount to put in the basket, and one could be worshiping and the other not. One person could be doing all those things outwardly, but their spirit is not in it. The true worshiper, on the other hand, doesn’t merely worship outwardly. It’s not just the things that other people can see. True worshipers worship in spirit and truth.

Mary an example of true worship (Luke 1:46-47)

Mary is a good example of a true worshiper. In Luke 1 we have recorded Mary’s wonderful prayer of praise after she has learned from Gabriel that she is to conceive and bear a son who will be the Messiah. This song of praise is known as the Magnificat from the Latin translation of the prayer. “My soul *magnifies* [magnificat] the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.” Her excitement about God, her joy in God, is welling up from the deepest part of her being—from her soul, her spirit.

A definition of vain worship (Mark 7:6-7)

We can contrast that with Jesus’ stern rebuke of the religious leaders who were so zealous about worship, it seemed, but their worship was vain worship. I’ll read a few verses from Mark 7 where we find a definition of hypocrisy, which is an

important thing to understand in the context of this discussion of true worship.

“And he said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’” (Mark 7:6–7, ESV) He’s quoting from Isaiah 29:13, and in introducing the quotation He uses a very severe word to describe His opponents. He calls them hypocrites. It’s a word that comes from the theater, where the actors would wear various masks as they played different parts. It means pretender. So when it is used outside of the theater context, it refers to a duplicitous, insincere person. It’s a very strong rebuke that Jesus is leveling against the Pharisees and scribes. They come as religious overachievers, looking down their noses at Jesus and His disciples, and Jesus tells them that they’re just a bunch of poseurs. They posture themselves as the super spiritual heroes of society. But Jesus tells them, your so-called worship is no worship at all. It’s empty. It’s vain. You’re just pretenders.

This presents each of us with some soul-searching questions. When we attend public worship, are we doing so as a way of checking a box on our spiritual report card? Or reading the Bible, or praying, or giving financially to the church, or helping someone, or not watching certain movies, or not listening to certain music? What are the things you’re tempted to turn into outward, hypocritical worship?

We may have some very good things on our lists. Reading the Bible, praying, being generous, helping others, being wise about the things we watch and listen to—these are good things. But the question is: where is my heart? Do I see these things as a way of expanding my heart’s capacity to love and enjoy God? That’s real worship. That’s worship in spirit and truth. Or do I see these things as a list of chores that I must do, and if I do them well (according to how I define well), then I can use my list as a way of comparing myself to others and elevating myself above others. That’s what the Pharisees and scribes were doing. And that’s what we do when we define our worship in terms of certain external activities. Then it’s hypocritical worship, not worship in spirit and truth. Ask yourself: Am I honoring God with my lips while my heart is far from Him? Or am I doing these things out of the overflow of my heart’s delight in God? That’s the fight of faith—to do what we ought to do and to do those things not merely as a duty, but as a delight. When it’s out of delight in God, then it’s worship in spirit and truth.

We can look at this definition of hypocrisy that Jesus states, using the Isaiah quotation, and we can say that true worship is the opposite of that. If hypocrisy is honoring God with your lips while

your heart is far from Him, then true worship is honoring God with your whole being, while your heart is near to Him. Or another way to say that would be worship in spirit and truth.

But how does that happen? How does a person come to the place where they are honoring God, not just with their lips, but really, truly, wholeheartedly? How does it happen that a person's spirit is near to God?

True worship begins with regeneration. We cannot make ourselves into true worshipers of God. We all worship something, but apart from God's regenerating work in our hearts, we will worship anything other than God. We worship self and success and money and sex and power and comfort. That is how our hearts are programmed because of our sinful nature.

But in the hearts of those who have been regenerated (born again), those who have received living water from Jesus, there is a new craving, a new thirst. God has removed the heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh, as we've been memorizing in our verse from *The Gospel Project* curriculum. The promise of God that is fulfilled in the new covenant, as He says in Ezekiel 11:19-20, "I will give them one heart and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." God does that amazing miracle by the power of His sovereign grace. He changes our hearts. He pulls out the heart of stone that was there, and He gives us a heart of flesh. He gives us new affections, new desires. He gives us a heart that desires to be near Him. Not just a desire to do certain external things that seem spiritual and might impress other people, but a heartfelt desire "to delight in the beauty of God's greatness." That's the first line of our mission statement at 3RG, and it's a concise definition of true worship. And it only happens when God regenerates a person. Left to ourselves, we delight in anything but God. But when God opens the eyes of our hearts to see the beauty of His greatness, then we delight in Him above all else. We come to despise our sin and turn away from our sin and instead put our hope in the cross of Christ and what He has accomplished for us. That is true worship. True worship begins with regeneration. Then we persevere in true worship, spurred on by the Holy Spirit who is the living water welling up inside of us.

Let me comment here on the word "spirit" in this passage. One of the questions in your mind concerning this text might be in that phrase "worship in spirit and truth," whether that's a reference to the Holy Spirit [capital "S" as the NIV renders it] or the human spirit [lowercase "s" as the ESV puts it]. It's the same Greek word, *pneuma*, which means spirit and can refer to either the Holy

Spirit or the human spirit, and the Greek doesn't capitalize the word when referring to the Holy Spirit, so we have to look for other clues to know whether it's a reference to the Holy Spirit or the human spirit. If the word "holy" was there too, we would know it's the Holy Spirit. But since it just says "spirit" it is somewhat ambiguous.

I go with the ESV here in understanding this to be the human spirit, but of course the two are very closely related. This is spiritual worship happening in our spirit, not just outwardly in our physical bodies. I think that's what Jesus is talking about. It is from a person's spirit. But this is dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit, who (as I pointed out last time from John 7:37-39) is the living water. The Holy Spirit is the spring of water welling up to eternal life. The Holy Spirit is given to us when we're born again, and He awakens and sustains true worship in our spirit.

To connect this again with the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus, think of Jesus' statement, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). And a couple verses later He refers to "everyone who is born of the Spirit." There is a spiritual birth brought about by the Holy Spirit. And based on our passage this morning we can add, there is spiritual worship that results from that spiritual birth. Those who are born of the Spirit will worship in spirit and truth.

Now let me say just a bit more about worship in truth, specifically. True worship, as opposed to ill-informed worship or vain worship, true worship is spiritual. It arises from a deep well inside of us, a well filled with the living water of the Holy Spirit. And this worship will resonate with truth. It is worship in spirit *and truth*.

That is an admonition to us to apply our minds in worship. Worship is not just a feeling. I do believe there are strong emotions we'll feel in our worship, but those emotions should arise from truth about who it is we're worshipping, not merely from the mood of a worship song or the décor of a sanctuary or the well-told stories of a preacher.

True worship is worship in spirit and truth. True worshipers will worship in spirit and truth. That means the truth of God's Word is so, so important to us. We don't want our worship to be ill-informed. We don't want our worship to be without a rudder, without a foundation. There's a lot of so-called worship going on that is without a rudder and without a foundation. Whatever stirs the emotions and gathers a crowd is labelled a success by many in our day. But that doesn't mean it's true worship.

True worship *will* involve emotion because it's from the depths of one's spirit. But those worshipful emotions welling up

within us will be rooted in the truth of God's character, the wonder of the Gospel, that our Holy God saw fit to rescue hell-deserving sinners like us. That should stir up some passion with us, don't you think? Intense feelings of gratitude for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, feelings of hope and joy because of His resurrection and the promises He's made to us in His Word. That is worship in spirit and truth.

And let me make this clarification as well. Let me try to bust up some unbiblical paradigms about worship. "Worship" is not just the singing that we do when we're together. Some people talk like, we have the "worship time" and then comes the sermon. No, that's not right. This whole time we should think of as corporate worship. We are worshipping God together, through our singing and praying and studying God's Word and in the Lord's Supper and the offering and the fellowship with one another.

And then we need to widen this out further. Because our time together on these Sunday mornings is not the full extent of worship. This is a special time of worship, but it's not as though believers worship a couple hours per week when they come to a particular building and sing songs and hear a sermon. Worship is not confined to Sunday mornings. Worship is something that we should be doing in and through all of our activities in life.

We worship in home life, in work and play, in parenting and in friendships, in fellowship with other believers, in evangelism to unbelievers, in personal Bible study and prayer as well as our vocation and chores around the house. All of life should be oriented toward God, our attitude and motivation, where we find our purpose and identity, what we're looking to for joy and satisfaction . . . For true worshipers, this will be the overflow into every facet of life.

Contemplate this in the weeks to come. Are you a true worshiper? Is there a spring of spiritual water within you welling up to eternal life? Is there a thirst for more of God? And are you seeking to quench that thirst, day after day, by communing with God in His Word and in prayer, and in fellowship with other believers, and in the joy of letting this living water spill over into the lives of those who are still living in their sin, hiding their sin from Jesus.

The Father Is Seeking True Worshipers (v. 23)

One final and brief point, from verse 23. I made a point last week about Jesus seeking out this woman. Well, we see here that the Father, too, is a seeker. He is seeking true worshipers. "the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."

We have to understand that this is fundamentally different than annoying and prideful people who are seeking worshipers. There are a lot of people seeking worshipers. Hey, look at me! Applaud me. Pat me on the back. Tell me how awesome I am.

We can hardly stand that when mere humans do it. What's different about the Father seeking people to worship Him? Here's the difference. When God calls us to worship Him, that's the most loving thing He can do for us. When mere mortals are trying so desperately to get attention for themselves, that's not loving. But when God draws attention to Himself, and seeks people to worship Him, it is the most loving thing in the world. Why? Because beholding God's greatness and delighting in Him is the greatest gift we could ever receive. Each of us has a hunger and thirst to behold greatness. We are searching for satisfaction, and real satisfaction will only come in beholding that which is truly great. And there is nothing greater than God in the universe, therefore to see Him and know Him and be in His presence—that is the thing we all need, even if we don't realize it. That is the highest good imaginable.

The Father seeking true worshipers is a great mercy to us. Jesus is seeking. The Father is seeking. Will you respond to the offer? Will you receive this living water? Will you come to the fountain and drink and be satisfied? For Jesus says in verse 14, "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again." Turn from your broken cisterns that can hold no water, and come find satisfaction for your soul in the living water that Jesus gives.