

What is Worship?

Romans 9:4

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Most of us know that the reason for the existence of Campus Church, Fish Enterprises and Christian Corps is to get 10,000 of us abroad living like Jesus, expressing his love and his peace and doing ordinary jobs: some of us working as carpenters, some of us as schoolteachers, some of us running restaurants and some of us running schools and hospitals throughout the world. Besides the group of us that operate the restaurant in London, perhaps two or three hundred of us during summer vacations have spent two months in about seven or eight countries.

Several brothers and sisters recently returned from Taiwan. Dave was telling me about the Buddhist temples in Taipei. He said he stood in them often and watched worshippers in front of the statues of the gods, dropping stones and then picking them up hour after hour. Do you know what they were doing? They were trying to get a "yes" from the gods. If the stones fell in a certain pattern, that meant the god answered "no" to their question, and if the stones fell in a different pattern it meant the god was answering "yes" to their questions. So they kept on and on, knowing that the law of averages would eventually produce the answer they wanted.

Now if you reflect on it, you know fine well that those worshippers are just bluffing. It is not the god who is ruling their lives at all. They are ruling their OWN lives, but they are trying to rationalize away the deep-seated conviction that is in every human being that there is a God who has made them and DOES want to rule and provide for their lives. They have to do something with that conviction. So, what they have done is to imagine a god whom they can manipulate and pay lip service to -- a stone idol or wooden image -- and meanwhile, they run their lives as they want. Of course, it is just a game.

From the early days when our forefathers rejected God and rejected his right to guide our lives, that's what every man-made religion has tried to do. It has tried to rationalize away the deep-seated conviction that God had the right to run our lives and yet tried to do it in a way that allowed us to remain our own gods and run our own lives. That kind of religion is just filled with frustration and insecurity because you know that all you are doing is going through theatrics and antics -- but really, you are ignoring God himself. You are ignoring him as he really is and you are setting up in his place an image that you can manipulate. So all the time you are simply giving to God unbelief, contempt and indifference. There is no way in which he can respond to you when you treat him like that.

It is the same here in our human relationships. No human being would respond to you if you treated him as if he were something completely different from what he really is. That is why the first date is so important. When you think of how you worked out what kind of flowers she would like, where would she like to go, what would she like to talk about, what you should wear -- because you knew that if you were going to have any personal relationship with this other human being at all, you have to treat him or her as they are. You have to treat them appropriately according to the kind of people they are -- otherwise there will be no relationship between you and them at all.

It was the same with Jimmy Carter when he went to Buckingham Palace. He had to wear a tuxedo because he knew that the Queen had not played too much softball, probably had never ordered grits for

breakfast and didn't spend much time lying back on her throne with a Coke in her hand. He had to treat her as she was used to being treated in order to have any relationship with her at all. Loved ones, you and I know when you go into a store and the salesman treats you as an "it", it just turns you off. He spews out the old formula irrespective of what you are. He would do the same even if you weren't there. You know you feel that he is making fun of you. He isn't dealing with you as a person at all. It is the same in longer relationships. The reason twenty-year-old marriages begin to deteriorate is the two partners cease to be interested in what the other person is really like.

Loved ones, dealing with our God is the same. A personal relationship with God requires the same respect and the same good sense. The only way to get any response from our Creator is to approach him in the way that is appropriate for him. If you approach him in some other way, you'll get no response from him at all. Every religion, every superstition has been an attempt to discover that way. That's the question that they all try to answer, "How do you approach our Creator in a way that will enable him to establish a personal relationship with us human beings?" They all try -- and they try hopelessly because there is only one people to whom our Creator revealed the way he wanted to be approached. That people is the Israelite nation. That is what Paul says in Romans 9:4: "They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises."

That is what we are talking about. Worship is approaching our Creator in the way that he revealed that he wanted to be approached. If we do that, we will find that God speaks back to us. I don't know how many of you have had real trouble getting any response from your Maker. Loved ones, this is what worship is about. Worship is approaching our Creator in a way that is appropriate to him and in a way that enables him to respond to us; in a way that shows him that we do really believe in him, we do really respect him, we are really anxious to get to understand him. That is what worship is about.

The word itself in that verse emphasizes the personal relationship. The word is a Greek word "latreia" and it means "service in the temple" -- or as it is translated in the RSV, "worship". It comes from a Greek verb, "latreuo" which means "to minister". That's the first step in worshipping. It's ministering. I think a lot of us in our present social environment and atmosphere say, "I'm glad you hit that. Now you are going to talk about religion in politics, and how you can minister to human beings and fill their needs." Loved ones, that isn't it.

I'll point you to a verse that will show you what kind of ministry is talked about in worship. I Chronicles 15:2: "Then David said, 'No one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, for the Lord chose them to carry the ark of the Lord and to minister to him for ever.'" That is what worship is. It is not ministering to all of us. It is ministering to God. Aaron and his sons and all the priests of the Old Testament went to such trouble washing their robes and getting themselves cleaned up, not so that they would look good in front of all the people, but so that they would look good in God's presence. That is the purpose that God created us for: to minister to him. That is why Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind." We are created to minister to our God.

What does it mean to minister to a person or minister to his needs? Think of Muriel Humphrey [wife of former Vice President Hubert Humphrey] or our sister from Tennessee who has been attending her husband who has been sick in the hospital here at the University. What does it mean when you think of Muriel Humphrey sitting beside Hubert Humphrey as he lies there in bed -- or any wife, because won't it come to all of us -- any husband or wife or son or daughter here who will sit by the side

of their mom or dad while they are dying? What does it mean to minister to their needs?

You just sit there and when they want a drink, you give them a drink. When they want to be quiet, you sit there and you are quiet. If they want to talk, you talk to them. If they want to shift around in the bed, you help them shift their position so that they are more comfortable. You listen to their breathing and you watch them while they are sleeping. You are utterly preoccupied with them. Your whole love and attention is upon them. That is what it means to minister to a person. All of you have received that kind of ministry, and you know the life that it gives you. Every one of us, from when we were little kids, know what it was like for our mom to minister to us life when we were sick.

Now, loved ones, that is what worship is. It is coming together here in a room like this and getting preoccupied with our Creator, loving him and desiring him, wanting to find out what he is thinking, wanting to find out what he wants us to do. It is your eyes on God alone, ministering to him all your attention, and all your love and all your interest.

Do you see why so many of us are getting so little response from God? I'll give you some of the questions and answers. You know them as well as I do. Why do you go to this church? "I go to this church because it meets my needs." "I go to this church because I get ministered to." "I go to that church because the preacher speaks to me." I suppose they are all legitimate if eventually, you get off that kick. But do you see that if you stay on that kick, no wonder you are not getting any response from your Creator because your idea of worship is you being ministered to. Your whole idea of worship is, "What do I get out of this?" Brothers and sisters, do you see why we are running such a circus in our church-life throughout the world? Often our choice of a church is based on: I like the preacher or I don't like the preacher. I like the people or I don't like the people. I like the architecture or I don't like the architecture. I like the organist or the guys or the girls or the singing.

Don't you see it is utterly ridiculous? It is an absolute contradiction of what worship is about. It is like going to the house of your benefactor who has given you all the money you possess, who has given you all the clothes you wear, who has provided you with anything you needed in your job, and has given you the job that you have -- and you say, "Now what are you going to do for me?" That is what it is. It is not the way to worship God. It isn't the way the loved ones in the Old Testament worshipped him and it isn't the way that God wants to be worshipped.

I honestly think some of you may be having real trouble getting a response from God in your prayer life or your church life because you are absolutely off-center. You have yourself in the center of worship and not God. Or you have the preacher in the center of worship, or you have the singing in the center of worship or you have the church in the center of worship -- not God, himself. Real worship is ministering to God our Creator. It is amazing how you begin to be free from self as you begin to do that.

There is another side of worship that I think we can learn about when we look at the Jews. The handbook for worship in the Old Testament was Leviticus, so would you look at it? The first chapter (Leviticus 1:1-9) outlines through God's words to Moses the kind of worship that he wants to receive. "The Lord called Moses, and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, When any man of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of cattle from the herd or from the flock. If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it at the door of the tent of

meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord; he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. Then he shall kill the bull before the Lord; and Aaron's sons the priests shall present the blood, and throw the blood round about against the altar that is at the door of the tent of meeting. And he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces; and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar, and lay wood in order upon the fire; and Aaron's sons the priests shall lay the pieces, the head, and the fat, in order upon the wood that is on the fire upon the altar; but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn the whole on the altar, as a burnt offering, an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord."

Then look at verses 6-7: "And he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces: and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar, and lay wood in order upon the fire." It would really hold the children's attention! Not too much chance of nodding off half-way through the service. If you nodded off too near to the fire it might be your last sleep. But really, when you think about it, lots of action! We are up here and you bring the bull and I cut it up and throw it on and light the fire, and the flames leap up to the ceiling -- really exciting! That is the first thing that strikes you about the worship -- there was action. It was life. You did things. Look at verse 3: "If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish." You brought the very best that you had. I don't own any livestock -- except that miserable little Yorkshire terrier -- but just think, you bring the best. It could be your little pet that you bring and offer to God. Worship costs you.

That kind of worship is a declaration to God that, "The best that I have is yours, Lord." You know how we respond. We say, "Well, you are right. I'm so glad I'm not those poor primitives. They were so anxious to placate their God, to persuade him to accept them that they had to take cows and bulls and slay them and offer them before God that they would somehow persuade God to accept them. Then they took the best of their grains and cereals and they burnt them before God. I certainly am glad we are beyond that. They were so dumb, so primitive, that God had to speak to them so vividly." We're so lucky. We come in here and juggle a few thoughts, sing a few songs, share a few ideas, send out a few good vibes and get back a few good vibes, and we go home with as unreal and mental a relationship with God as our worship has been unreal and mental. Isn't that right?

If you say to me, "Well, do you mean we have to offer up blood offerings in order for our worship to be real?" No, loved ones. God has never and will never accept us because of the blood of animals. That wasn't why those animals were offered. Their blood was shed to stand for that cosmic death that experienced the wrath of God for all of us in that Lamb that was slain from before the foundation of the world. Those sacrifices just stood for that cosmic death. The only reason offering the blood or slaughtering the most precious possessions had any value at all, was that it was the worshipper declaring to God, "I know that you have done something to destroy what is wrong in me -- somewhere, somehow that I don't understand -- and I symbolize it by the blood that is offered. I know that what you have done is to destroy my dependence on this world's possessions so that I could depend on you alone. To show you that I believe with all my heart, I slaughter before you the possessions that most men depend on for their security." That was the meaning of those sacrifices.

Loved ones, that is our situation. You don't have to offer blood or sacrifices. But don't you see that our worship is just a mental and emotional gymnastic game -- unless in your financial and materialistic life every day that you exist you are giving and sacrificing to God and unless your business is primarily to do things for God? It doesn't mean that you have to give out tracts all day. You can be a plumber, but your plumbing, your whole business is done for him. The money that

you get from it is put at his disposal. Only when your worship is life and action and costs you a lot -- only then will you begin to hear God speak as vividly as the Jews did. That is true.

I think one of the greatest tragedies is that we have got so much more than those dead Israelites. We have Jesus plainly placarded as crucified before us, knowing that our OLD selves have been destroyed with him and he can give us a completely NEW self in the Holy Spirit. The tragedy is that we know all that, but our worship is a play act, a game. Wouldn't you agree that most of us think of it as a mental and emotional thing? Wouldn't you agree that most of us come here and think, "How can I get myself into a feeling that God is here? How can I think the right thoughts?"

Don't you see that is not what it is about at all? It is about sacrificing the most important things in your life to God. It is about declaring before him by your weekly day-to-day life that all your possessions, your job, everything you do in life is for him and is at his disposal. When you are like that, then this will be real. When you will not roll over in bed to get out to pray in the morning, you cannot expect your worship to be real. When you will not give freely to someone who needs because you are so busy counting what you are going to have left, then it is impossible for your worship to be real. When you cut somebody apart with your tongue in a store on Tuesday, it is impossible for your worship on Sunday to be real and to get any response from God. God is not mocked. He will not be treated in that unreal way. He requires us to be as realistic and active in our worship as he required the Jews.

Just one last thing -- I honestly think this is important for us who are trying to get God real in our lives. It's in Leviticus 4:27-29: "If any one of the common people sins unwittingly in doing any one of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, and is guilty, when the sin which he has committed is made known to him he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed. And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering, and kill the sin offering in the place of burnt offering." Do you see what the hypothesis is? It isn't talking about a known sin that God expects us to live above -- if we want him to treat us for real on Sunday -- this is an unconscious sin, an unintentional sin. If anyone sins unwittingly, unconsciously, or unintentionally, if they do something and a moment afterwards realize it was wrong; immediately they realize their guilt and it costs them a goat. People in those days depended on their livestock for their livelihood. It was precious to them when they had to sacrifice one of their livestock. That is how important it was in God's eyes for men to keep short accounts with him about their sins.

Do you see our situation? It is pitiful, isn't it? You know the way we have encouraged each other, "Don't bother about your sins. Jesus has died for them. It doesn't matter if you have sinned once a day or three times a week -- it is no big deal. Just ask forgiveness and that is it." It is true that God forgives -- but he only forgave if people sacrificed, made restitution, showed him that they were serious about their repentance; that they realized that it was this very sin that had caused Jesus to die on Calvary. In other words, they did everything to avoid trampling under their feet the blood of Jesus.

Loved ones, I think some of you have trouble sensing God's reality in your life or hearing God speak to you, not because you haven't a vivid imagination, but because you are casual and light about your sins. You are easy-going about the very thing that destroyed God's own family. You are casual about the very thing in your life that caused his Son to be slaughtered on Calvary.

Could you blame any father for not responding to a person who tramples under his feet the blood of

his own son? God's Word is always, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18) -- but only if you confess your sins. Only then is he faithful and just to forgive you your sins -- only if you are serious about your confession and repent of them and determine never to do them again. Only then can the worship be real. Do you see that?

I feel for all of us here, because we have been brought up in such error about this. We have been so intent to encourage each other to feel forgiven that we have not seen that the only way that God can ever forgive us -- because forgiveness is the restoration of relationship -- the only way God can ever restore the relationship that we have broken by our independence of him is if we give up and stop our independence. You see yourselves, you are not stopping your independence if you come in here Sunday after Sunday with more of the same sins on your conscience that you committed the previous week -- more blood of Jesus that you have trampled under your feet. It is just not reasonable to expect that any Being, however divine, would be right to overlook that kind of hostility in us.

So brothers and sisters, will you think about what you do when you come here to worship? Is your worship preoccupation with God -- or with the rest of us? Is it real-life action that costs you through the week? Is your life through the week centered around God? Is your life serious about your fear of sin? Are you really afraid to sin? Do you really hate sin with all your heart? If you will come into line with what God has shown us about worshipping him, I know he will begin to speak back to you. He will begin to respond to you and you will begin to hear his voice. Be real about your worship. If you see something that you haven't been doing, start now. Don't waste time in remorse and regret. Don't argue about the finer details. If you see something, if God has spoken about something this morning, start doing it. You will find that God will begin to come down upon us in these morning services and he will begin to speak clearly so that every one of us will know it is him -- that will come when we are real about our worship.