

True Worship

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John 4:4-30

R. Tim Meadows, *Associate Pastor,*
Tellico Village Community Church
Loudon, Tennessee

“I guess I’ll see you in about three weeks,” snapped the grumpy old man, to no one in particular and really to everyone around him who might listen. It seems that this grumpy old man had just gained knowledge of the fact that his rather formal church would be experimenting with some different worship styles in the weeks to come and that, in fact, the week to follow after the beautiful classical service that he had just enjoyed, he would be subjected to contemporary worship. And the week following that, he would be subjected to bluegrass music in worship. And so to no one in particular and to everyone who would listen, he snapped, “I guess I’ll see you in about three weeks.”

As a veteran of the worship wars who’s heard that and much worse in the years that I’ve served churches, I take some comfort in the fact that Jesus also dealt with this same sort of thing, that Jesus also confronted those who weren’t quite sure about how worship was supposed to look, and then confronted others who were exactly sure how worship was supposed to look, who were fairly certain that the way anyone else was doing it was not correct. Yes, Jesus dealt with this same sort of thing, and the passage that you just heard from the Gospel of John shows us how Jesus dealt with the question of the proper location of worship.

In dealing with this woman who was very concerned about the proper location of worship, Jesus simply declared that worship, in fact, is not about location. It’s not about style. It’s not about dress. It’s not about music. It’s not about formality versus informality. But, Jesus declared, worship is about the heart; real worship comes from a heart of spirit and truth.

As often happens with Jesus (I don’t know whether to blame this on Jesus or to blame it on the gospel writers, but if I ever find out I’ll let you know who’s at fault), Jesus makes this declaration about spirit and truth and then stops. And we’re not told how to discern whether one is worshiping in spirit and in truth. But there are some indications in Scripture and from life that we can examine to help us determine whether or not our hearts worship in spirit and in truth.

For the next few minutes, I want to invite you on that journey. Let me begin by suggesting to you that one of the ways that I think we can evaluate the spirit and truth of worship is through our acts of charity. After all, Jesus does say that the eternal value of our lives will be judged on how well we fed the hungry, how well we clothed the naked, how well we cared for the poor, how often we visited those who were imprisoned. And in the letter attributed to Jesus’ brother, James tells us in fact that pure religion or true religion approved by God is the kind of religion that makes certain that those on the margins of life are always cared for. James speaks

specifically of caring for the widows and the orphans and those for whom no one else in society would find concern. So maybe, just maybe, these are some of the measures of spirit and truth in worship. If we want to know whether our hearts are indeed engaged in spirit and truth, we can look at our acts of charity.

So I ask you today: if Jesus were to look at your acts of charity, would he find the spirit and truth of worship?

I would also suggest that a way of evaluating the spirit and truth of worship is through our stands of courage in life. Let me tell you a couple of stories.

The first story is about a friend who grew up in middle Georgia when the issues of segregation were about to reach a boiling point. This friend left work one day and went as he normally did to public transportation and got on the bus and sat down with an empty seat beside him. Not too long after he sat in the empty seat, an older African American gentleman also entered the bus. As he was standing there weary from his day of work, my friend said to him, "Sir, why don't you sit down?" The gentleman began to protest, "Son, you know the rules. You know how life is here. You know that I can't sit there. You know that's not legal." To which my friend said, "Well, I'm sitting here, and this seat is empty, and I think I can invite anyone to sit beside me that I'd like. And I'm inviting you to sit down. So, why don't you sit down?" The elderly gentleman decided with an invitation like that he probably should respond to the young man. He sat down.

You can imagine in middle Georgia at the height of segregation that it would not be long before a big, burly, authoritative bus driver appeared and proceeded to tell the African American man that he could not sit there. "Sir, you must get up. That seat is not available to you." My young friend, full of brash energy and enthusiasm, accosted the bus driver and protested, "But I asked him to sit there, and as far as I'm concerned I can ask anyone to sit beside me that I like." You can imagine again knowing the times and conditions, the bus driver didn't wait long before he ceremoniously dumped both of these individuals off of the bus. It may have been a long walk home for my friend, but I think that kind of stand of courage exhibits the kind of spirit and truth that Jesus said was essential to our worship.

When I think of stands of courage, I also think of Congressman John Lewis from the fifth district of Georgia. Congressman Lewis has been a champion for the neglected his entire career. He has stood in the gap for things that most people said could never be legislated, could never be passed. He has worked for the oppressed and neglected and made a life doing so. But it almost didn't happen. As a young man Congressman John Lewis was almost killed. As a nonviolent freedom rider and a nonviolent protestor on the Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, with Hosea Williams and others, Congressman Lewis was beaten, bloodied, and left for dead, hoping by those who beat him that his voice would be silenced. Today John Lewis' body still bears the marks of the many beatings that he took. If you ask me, these stands of courage exemplify the very spirit and truth in worship of which Jesus spoke.

So, if it is by stands of courage that we evaluate the spirit and truth of worship, let me ask you: if Jesus looked at the stands of courage you have taken in your life, would he find the spirit and truth of worship?

We can also evaluate the spirit and truth of worship through lives of character. Most of you know that I'm a huge major league baseball fan. And in fact I spend a lot of time trying to get to major league parks and to minor league parks as well. If I'm at home watching baseball, I flip between two channels with one game in the picture-in-picture and try to follow both games at the same time. For about nine months out of the year, baseball becomes my life; and, yes, the St. Louis Cardinals will win the World Series. But this year in the baseball world, it's been a bittersweet year, because this year we say goodbye to one of baseball's finest. The career of Chipper Jones is coming to an end. Everywhere that Chipper has gone all season, there have been great tributes to him by people from opposing cities and teams. They've lauded and celebrated the grand career that Chipper Jones has had. But I think the greatest tribute that I've heard Chipper receive through this year was one that was offered one night by one of the Atlanta Braves' broadcasters.

I was talking with the Atlanta Braves historian the other day, and this is what he says about Chipper Jones:

When I think of a modern player who epitomizes the game of baseball and what a modern baseball player should be, I think of Chipper Jones. Further, when I try to get a visual of what an Atlanta Brave should look like, the visual that I get is of Chipper Jones, a life of character.

I wonder, if people were seeking visuals, say in the automotive industry or in the field of engineering or in sales or banking or government service or ministry, I wonder if the visuals they would get would be of any of us.

A life of character is the measure of spirit and truth in our worship. And so I ask you, if Jesus were to look at your life of character, would he find the spirit and truth of worship?

I have to tell you, I feel sorry for that grumpy old man that I talked about earlier. I feel sorry for him because he has confused the essence of worship with style. I feel sorry for the woman in our New Testament lesson today because for far too long she confused the location of worship with the essence of worship itself. And I feel sorry for us if we don't recognize that the truth of worship is about spirit and truth, if we don't recognize that the spirit and truth to which Jesus points must arise out of our acts of charity, out of our stands of courage, and out of lives of character. If we don't recognize that, then we've missed what Jesus says is truly the heart of worship. May God give us the grace and the eyes to see that this, in fact, is the kind of worship of which God approves.

Amen!