

“True Worship”  
a sermon from Psalm 63  
by Phil Henry  
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One of the principal ills of moderns is that we have become a human *doings* instead of human *beings*. This pithy saying suggests that our frailty as people is to forget, both in mind and in heart, the sacred order of the great questions of the universe: first we must ask, “Who am I?” and only then, second: “What am I here to do?”

These questions are embedded in the Presbyterian tradition in the first question, and answer, to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: “What is man’s chief end? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

Worshipping God—which is what the Westminster divines meant by “glorifying God”—begins with understanding your identity is secure in the God who created you, and as such, you are free to *forget* yourself by delighting in, and enjoying God.

Have you ever heard of athletes being in the “zone”? That’s when LeBron hits five three point shots in a row, or Roger tosses up four straight aces against Raphael...or I manage to go a whole round without losing a golf ball.

Think of “forgetting yourself” as being in the zone of the *human* game. Its rare, isn’t it? I think its because we are deathly *afraid* to leave ourselves—like a person who is paranoid of leaving his house because he’s afraid of someone breaking in and stealing his stuff. How can we go out of ourselves if we have no idea of who we are?

I'm speaking about worship this morning and my main point today relates to exploring identity questions like this. If you remember nothing else this morning, remember this: **worship is first about who we are, not about what we do.**

We come this morning to an emotional text of Scripture, the Sixty Third Psalm. By "emotional" I mean that it touches on some of the deepest reservoirs of human emotion and pathos. As such, it is not primarily an intellectual text, but one that speaks more directly to the heart. It is also one that is very useful in thinking about our identity as human beings.

As I'm moving into the Old Testament, it might be helpful to remember that though Christians have historically divided the Bible into two parts (one part called the Old Testament; the other called the New) they hold that both tell different parts of the **one story** of redemption whose primary character is called Messiah.

The Old Testament focuses on the preparation for the coming of this Messiah, and the book of Psalms, to which we turn this morning, develops the theme of living by faith, faith in the certainty of God's promise to send a Messiah, in spite of the reality of a broken and at times overwhelmingly cruel world.

I've called my sermon this morning "True Worship" and that's an appropriate title—this particular psalm mentions worship in almost every verse. Take a look:

- Earnestly I seek you (v. 1)
- I have looked on you in the sanctuary (v. 2)
- My lips will praise you (v. 3)
- I will bless you (v. 4)
- My mouth will praise you (v. 5)
- I meditate on you and remember you (v. 6)
- I will sing for joy (v. 7)
- My soul clings to you (v. 8)
- The King shall rejoice in God (v. 11)

As I read through these verses, I was challenged in what I understand worship to be. I'd like to do you the favor this morning of passing that challenge along and ask you to reconsider your definition of worship.

**Remember my main point this morning is this: worship is first about who you are, and only then about what you do.** I'd like to take both parts of this point in the reverse order and look first at the "what you do" parts of worship that are mentioned explicitly in this psalm, and finish by seeing how what we do in worship must be grounded first on who we are, or who we believe we are.

In theological language, I'll be discussing the imperative first (what we must do, as it is presented in our text) and the basis for what we do, second—called the indicative.

My outline, then, will be **1)** redefining what we are called to do in worship; and then showing how what we *do* HAS TO BEGIN with **2)** redefining who we are called to be in worship. I'll conclude with some specific applications or "take aways."

## **I. Redefining What We Do In Worship**

For my first point this morning, I'd like to show you six aspects of the "what you do" kind of worship that we tend to forget, but that are very important in this Psalm.

We need to remember context, however. In the context of the Psalms, "worship" means God's people assembling for some Holy Day, or a Sacrificial Meal, or some Ritual Celebration commanded in the Mosaic Law. Much has changed in the way believers worship now, in the New Covenant, a model loosely based on the first century pattern of the Jewish synagogue.

But, despite these *differences*, much remains the same—and we would do well to learn from David's practice of worship today. Here are six ways David's practice of worship needs to help redefine ours.

### ***Redefined Element 1: Saturated, not Segregated***

Here's the first element of redefining worship. Worship should be a saturated, not a segregated, activity. Notice how this can be seen in the text.

It is true that David "looks upon" God in the sanctuary (verse 2), the Old Testament context for worship. But notice too: David promises he will "bless" God as long as he lives (verse 4) and that he will remember God "upon my bed" and "meditate" on God "through the watches of the night." (verse 6).

### ***Redefined Element 2: Body, not just Brain***

The third element of a redefined concept of worship that I notice in Psalm 63 is that for David, worship involved his body, not just his brain. Look how you can see this in the text:

- David's flesh fainted for God as much as his soul thirsted for God (v. 1-2)
- David described the mental and spiritual satisfaction of worship and communion with God in physical ways ("my soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food")
- David didn't just sing to God in his heart, he sang with "joyful lips" (v 5) and he praised God "with my lips" (v 3).
- David not only lifted up God's name with his voice, he lifted up God's name with his hands (v 4)
- David didn't merely look on God in his heart, in his mind, but in "the sanctuary" so there was some geo-physical special component—coordinates on the map, so to speak—to at least some aspects of the worship of God.  
(verse 2)

### ***Redefined Element 3: Singing not just Supposing (i.e., Thinking)***

Along with the third redefined element of worship (Body not just Brain) David didn't confine his worship to thinking about God, supposing things about God.

Rather, in David's worship, he actually sang to God. David uses the voice of song to worship God in this Psalm.

Of course, he is nicknamed elsewhere in the Bible the "psalmist of Israel" and as a warrior bard must have possessed an unusual musical ability to soothe King Saul in the midst of his rage.

Still, the fact that David was a gifted musician doesn't negate our need to redefine worship in terms that aren't merely mental, but that actually use the voice in physical ways to worship God.

#### ***Redefined Element 4: Desperate, not Demure***

The second element of redefining worship in Psalm 63 is that worship is to be desperate, not demure. Demure is defined as "modest and reserved in manner or behavior."<sup>1</sup> The problem is that while Western Christians are often demure in their worship, it is not what characterizes David's worship in this Psalm. David is "desperate" not "demure."

Take a look at the *desperate* quality David brings to the worship of God: "earnestly I seek you" (v 1); "my soul thirsts for you" (v 1); "my flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (v 2); "I will bless your name as long as I live" (v 4); "my soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food" (v 5); "my soul clings to you" (v 8).

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<sup>1</sup> Free online dictionary.

### ***Redefined Element 5: Grief, not just Gaiety (or Gladness)***

There is a school of thought that is absent from much of our own worship as Westernized American people and that is the element of grief. Notice that there is a significant element of anxiety, sadness, and even grief mingled into what is otherwise a predominantly joyful psalm. Look at the text:

- **in vv. 1-2**, David thirsts and yearns as one who is experiencing dehydration. He is in pain because of the fact that he can't have what he wants. I believe he is upset.
- **in vv. 6-7** suggest that David is having trouble sleeping, and having trouble remembering who has been his help through all the troubles of his life. Though the answer is obvious during the day time, David sees the need to resolve to remember this truth when the sun has set, and when our minds often become busy with the fears and worries and cares of the day. David's words here I take not as a testimony (this is what I always do) but as a prayer (this is what I ought to do, and by God's grace, shall do).
- **in vv. 8-11** we discover that the reason David must cling to God in his soul is because he is surrounded by enemies, forces both human and superhuman who would seek to undermine and even destroy him. He is in agony as a result of their manipulations and machinations and cries out to God to not only rescue him, but to destroy those who are opposing him. This is a man who, in the midst of a beautiful poem, experiences a deep and authentic grief.

### ***Redefined Element 6: Judgment, not just Joy***

Completing the thought from the fifth point, true worship according to Psalm 63 appears to involve some engagement with the battle David faces against his enemies. Which is to say, true worship, authentic worship, and our redefined picture of worship should include not just positive affirmations of what we love about God, but specific and negative denunciations of the things which are plaguing us and undermining our calling to worship God.

While I don't have time for a full treatment of the imprecatory portions of the Psalms—those prayers which ask God to bring anger and wrath on David's and God's enemies—it is important to notice that David is speaking not as a private person, but on behalf of the character and person of Almighty God. And if you were to ask, "How can any one person presume to speak on God's behalf?" I would reply: "If God has spoken, and given access to His speech to human beings, then people can and in fact should strive to speak on his behalf."

Specifically, as I mentioned last week in my meditation on the Apostle's Creed, it is important that we recognize that there is a judgment that is coming.

Too much of worship today lacks the quality that we find in Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," and lilt instead with something like a dusty old flower arrangement: nice, but irrelevant.

## **II. Redefining Who We Are in Worship**

My main point today has been that what we do in worship is based on who we are. This means the "who you are" part of worship is the foundation, and the "what you do" part of worship grows out from here.

Let me recap the six ways I think our worship needs to be redefined to be in line with God's definition:

***Redefined Element 1: Saturated, not Segregated***

***Redefined Element 2: Body, not just Brain***

***Redefined Element 3: Singing not just Supposing (i.e., Thinking)***

***Redefined Element 4: Desperate, not Demure***

***Redefined Element 5: Grief, not just Gaiety (or Gladness)***

***Redefined Element 6: Judgment, not just Joy***

In each one of these aspects, we see an identity foundation for someone who believes in God. Let's go through them one by one;

***Redefined Element 1: Saturated, not Segregated***

Who we are as people made in the image of God means that we, as people, are not to have our "spiritual" lives over here, and our "secular lives" over there. God has made us whole persons and "whole worship" flows out of a discovery that Jesus died and rose again to give the last word on all of my inner contradictions, my inner divisions, and my psychological separations.

***Redefined Element 2: Body, not just Brain***

***Redefined Element 3: Singing not just Supposing (i.e., Thinking)***

These two relate to the first one. People who only worship with their brain have in some way separated or segregated part of what God intends to use in worship. This "human doing" flows from what I believe is a false, or at least only partially true, concept of "human being"—remember, Jesus didn't rise from the dead only to save my soul, he did so also to save my body. I am a redeemed Person: body and soul, and my soul, at death, will be only temporarily separated from my body, awaiting the final resurrection of the dead. Singing with the voice is a very physical act, and likewise, suggests that God is interested in us using our bodies for what we "do" in worship as a response to our belief that He loves us body and soul, who we are in worship.

***Redefined Element 4: Desperate, not Demure***

Who I am as a sinner saved by Grace is someone who hasn't simply been given a little band-aid for all that ails me, but I've been rescued from destruction. This makes me desperately in need of God's grace...while there is room for different personalities among the people of God we are called by God to live out of this Gospel Desperation.

***Redefined Element 5: Grief, not just Gaiety (or Gladness)***

***Redefined Element 6: Judgment, not just Joy***

These final two elements indicate that the reality of our lives, now, in this moment, is far from perfect, far from whole, far from easy, and true worshippers will "do" the spectrum of emotions in their worship because they understand that their identity is in some ways still in formation. (Explain the already and not yet concept)

**A Story Application: *Retelling John 4 in light of Psalm 63***

In the beginning, I mentioned what my main point was....who we are in worship is more important, and is the basis for, what we do in worship. I'd like to conclude with a brief lesson from John 4 and Jesus interaction with the woman at the well.

In this story, Jesus is thirsty and finds himself at a well with nothing to draw water. A woman comes and he asks her for a drink. They get into a discussion about water and thirst quenching and the fact that there is water that is so satisfying it will never cause her to thirst again.

That principle, or the main analogy, is that throughout our whole lives—since worship of God is not confined to a day or a "space" (this building or room we meet in for Sunday gatherings is not technically a "sanctuary" is it?)—at all times, and in all places, but especially, and in a special way, when God's people gather together for corporate worship—but also at all times and in every place, ***worship is to bring us satisfaction.***

But in order for us, and the woman at the well, to perform worship that is satisfying, we must first be satisfied with who we are before a Holy God. When Jesus started to ask some personal questions, the woman started a debate about worship. She said, "Our fathers worshipped God on this mountain, but the Jews say we must worship on that mountain."

Jesus replies by saying, basically, "It is not about your worship practices, dear woman, or your "human doings." It is about who you are and who God is—God is seeking true worshippers: people whose identities have been formed and shaped by the redemption that He sends in the Messiah."

### **Conclusion**

In John 4, Jesus helps the woman at the well realize God's mission in the world: God is seeking *worshippers*. This shows the importance of the point I began with this morning: **worship is first about who we are, not about what we do.**

The woman diverted Jesus' focus of "who" she was to a "what" question: where should we worship, here or there? Jesus astutely avoided the theological debate and patiently redirected her to Himself, "He who speaks to you is the Promised Messiah."

What we learn from this is that God is seeking, that God is at least in some senses, "seeker sensitive." By seeking, we confess a number of mutually reinforcing truths: God seeks non-believers who are either open to worshipping him and haven't yet

done so; God seeks those who are worshipping Him but are doing so alone, and apart from a community of faith; God seeks out those who are hostile to the idea of worshipping Him, but in whose life God is about to make a change of heart to give them an appetite for the kind of satisfaction that can only come from Him.

David said, "My soul is satisfied as with fat and the richest of foods." David's satisfaction came because God sought him out and changed him into a true worshipper of God, a "who" person.

When we focus our discussions on mission, and on the lost, and on how we're doing in being the people of God He wants us to be, to fulfill His mission in the world—then it is easier for our preferences about "how we do public worship" to stay in their proper place as preferences, and for the law of love to enable us to stay united in the essentials of the faith.

These essentials will inevitably bring us to this basic truth about worship: we have been redeemed by the Messiah, Jesus Christ, risen from the dead on the third day. Now, having been conquered by His grace and made into God worshippers, we are called to join God in His mission to draw others—by our life, and our words—to discover the most satisfying, soul and life satisfying thing that ever can be found: knowing and experiencing the Love of God for sinners.

What if, as we do this, we get the what of worship, of corporate, Sunday church worship wrong? What if we get the "what" wrong while we get the "who" right?

On the other hand, what if we get the what exactly right—if that were even possible—but get the Gospel identity question, the "who" wrong—will God be pleased with us?

Our mission in the world is to seek first to be the people—the "who" people, not the "what" people—of God's own heart, of God's own identity. This by itself is evangelistic. But we don't stop there. We go further in the mission of God in the world to gather into our families, our church communities, others like us in whose lives God is working out His transforming grace.

Let us pray.