

ascribe

A Series On Worship



PART TWO

PSALM 63:3-4

Give Your Body Back to God
Psalm 63
Ricky Stephen

*Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name
I will lift up my hands.*



The scriptures are full of exhortations to praise God with our bodies—to clap our hands, lift our voices, raise our hands and bow our knees (see Psalm 47). However, not everybody puts these exhortations into practice. Three primary objections arise to the physically demonstrative aspects of worship: I'm not that kind of person, I'll do it only when I'm feeling it, and I'd be faking it for others to see.

We are called to give our whole selves to all of God. To, out of Mark 12:17, give to God what is God's.

Which means that part of our worship is giving our bodies back to God.

A Song from the Desert: Psalm 63

Psalm 63 begins with a statement about feeling dried up. But from there, it becomes a compilation of many of the ways a person can praise God with their body:

- Going to the sanctuary (v2)
- Singing praises (v3, 5, 7)
- Raising hands (v4)
- Remember/Meditation—in Hebrew literally 'murmur'—reading scripture our loud (v6)

Bodily worship is not reserved for specific feelings or situations, it is something we are called to participate in even in the most difficult and trying seasons.

Objection #1: I'm Not That Kind Of Person

We are not all called to worship God in the exact same fashion. "God loves everyone with a unique love; he wants to lead them all to perfection, but at the same time has very different paths for different people."^[1]

However, most of us are willing to express things in a physical aspect in all the other areas of our lives—jumping up when our team scores, dancing at a concert of our favourite band, etc.

When it comes to church contexts, sometimes a fear of being part of a certain expression or moving into something that is irrational or nonsensical is behind our lack of participation.

We also don't want to become the type of people who measure the presence of God based on our emotional state or whether or not people are participating in an outwardly demonstrative way.

For Scripture, the standard worship is judged by is our character and action the rest of the week (see Isaiah 58).

Truth #1: Called to Be a Person

But, sometimes, our retreat from the physical aspects of worship is a retreat from our bodies altogether. We can hide behind intelligence and skepticism as a way of protecting ourselves from our feelings and bodies.

[1] Jacques Philippe, In the School of the Holy Spirit, 26.



David Foster Wallace points the finger at this American tendency with one of his characters named Hal. Hal is an adolescent on his way to becoming a pro tennis player. He's a genius from a family of geniuses. But he can't feel anything—pleasure or pain. Wallace writes:

"Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool. One of the most American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for..."[2]

One worshipper who is held up as an example in the Scriptures is King David. Psalm 63 is attributed to David in a season where he was running for his life from his father-in-law. Even in that situation, we are encouraged to see him raising his hands in worship to God. See also 2 Samuel 6, where David dances so hard his clothes start falling off. Or 2 Samuel 12, where he loses a son and his first response is worship in the temple.

God calls us to be nothing more than a person—a heart, soul, mind, strength, and body type of person. But He calls us to be nothing less than a person.

Worshipping with our bodies is an act of rebellion against an incomplete vision of what it means to be human.

Excursus: Weird Things (Some) Christians Do Explained

The Scriptures give us helpful examples of how to worship with our bodies. Most of these actions are symbolic of the vulnerability we want to have before God.

Bowing is a way to show royalty that your life is in their hands. When you bow, you are vulnerable. When people were knighted, the King or Queen would symbolically wave a sword around their head. This was a symbol of their sacrificial love the knight would be called to.

Standing on our feet is what you do in the presence of royalty, showing you are ready to serve them.

Raising hands is about surrender—as in when someone who is robbing a bank tells you to raise your hands. It's a way of showing you are defenseless and unarmed. But it's also about desire—literally reaching out towards God in heaven.

[2] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 695.



People are not the only things in creation that sing. Birds sing as well, and they are observed to sing more vigorously when the dawn or sunset is more beautiful. “Music is love in search of the words.”[3] Singing expresses things beyond the rational.

We dance for the reasons we sing. Dancing is like singing with our limbs.

The beauty of these things is that they can express what we aren't feeling as well as what we are. We can put ourselves in a posture of surrender when we don't feel surrendered, but we want to.

Objection #2: I'm Not Feeling It

Authenticity is a buzzword in our therapeutic culture. Psychologist and embodiment expert Hilary McBride says: “We heal when we can be with what we feel.”[4]

But being with our feelings is not the same as obeying them. Dallas Willard once said “Feelings make wonderful servants but terrible masters.”

The Psalms make space for authenticity. Many of them open like Psalm 63, with an honest statement of the emotional place the Psalmist is in. But they do more than that as well.

Truth #2: Love is What You Do (Even When You Don't Feel Like It)

We are called to love God. Love is proven most when you do things for the good of the other, even when you don't feel it.

If you have a spouse or friend you love, but you never did anything good for them, they wouldn't believe you love them.

Jesus said in John 15:13: Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. He went to the cross even though he feared it and hoped salvation could be achieved another way (Matthew 26:36-46).

Truth #2b: Feelings Often Follow

The structure of the Psalms is often an initial complaint—with authenticity about feelings. Then they move on to promises of what the Psalmist will do, often in physical terms. Then they end in declarations of confidence (reread Psalm 63).

In their form, the Psalms seem to insinuate that feelings will often follow our actions. Praise God and you may find yourself loving Him.

Our bodies were made to adapt. They respond to the things we do with them. It's no different when it comes to worship.

[3] From the band Hey Ocean! in their song “If I Were A Ship”

[4] Hilary McBride, *The Wisdom of Your Body*, 108.



James Clear, an expert on habits and transformation, says one of the best ways to change is to assume the identity of the person you want to be. Then, work backwards and act like that type of person. If you want to quit smoking, tell yourself you're a non-smoker and act like one. [5]

Experimentation is a powerful tool for learning to worship with our bodies. Try something for a short timeframe and see what the effect is. If I kneel when I pray for a week, how has it changed my practice of loving God?

Objection #3: Other People Will See Me

Jesus' primary teaching on worship is in Matthew 6. The keywords in this teaching are 'secret' and 'reward'. He encourages people to give, pray and fast without a concern for being seen by others. Because, if the goal is being seen, the reward we are seeking is the approval of people.

This is not a prohibition on public expressions of worship. Jesus told His disciples about His legendary fast and temptation, or we wouldn't know about it (Matthew 4). We have a record of His public prayer (John 17). He was witnessed as caught up in the joy of the Spirit (Luke 10:21-24).

Jesus' teaching tells us that our primary concern in worship should be God, not what other people think. So, if we are worshipping in a demonstrative way to be noticed by others, it might be worth taking our practice to the secret place.

In our culture, it's more likely our concern about what others think holds us back in the physical aspects of worship. Today you could say: don't be like the hypocrites who love God with all their hearts but hide it because they fear looking like a fool.

Truth #3: The Church is a Gym

Some people say the church is not a hotel for saints but a hospital for sinners. The church is also a gym for people training in the love of God. It's a place where we flex the muscles of love to be strong in love outside the doors.

Knowing this, much like a gym, we should not judge what other people are doing but respect how they are trying to grow. Rather than thinking they are faking it, we should see them as trying to make themselves into the type of person who loves God. We are here to train.

And we are making this together. When we act in freedom and others see, sometimes that sets them free to worship the way they feel called.

God Gave His Body For You

Jesus stretched his hands out for you. He moved his feet up that hill to Calvary for you. He raised His voice with the good news and in agony for you. God does not require that we do something for Him that He has not done for us.

God gave His body for us, so let's give our bodies back to God.

[5] James Clear, Atomic Habits.



discussion

This first study is aimed at helping us consider what Christian worship is all about, and especially focuses on the “wholeness” or “broadness” of what worship means.

Open Up

EVERYONE SHARE

Share with one another what it is that sometimes holds you back from worshipping with your body. How do you relate to each of the three objections? Are there any other objections you’ve heard or raised yourself?

Dig In

READ

Read Psalm 47

1. What are the appropriate motivations for demonstrating our worship and what are the inappropriate ones?
2. What does this Psalm hold up as the motivation for worshipping with our bodies?
3. What is the connection between all this pomp and celebration and serving God in our daily lives? How does one inform the other?
4. What is a physical practice in worship you would like to adopt? What type of ‘experiment’ can you set up to build towards that?

Prayer

Pray for freedom and release for each other in worship—according to what each person desires for their own growth.

Consider engaging in some sort of physical practice together—whether kneeling or standing and raising hands while prayer, or even worshipping together. Make a pact of safety and non-judgment around these practices. Perhaps make a plan to implement this as a practice for your group that continues.