

Whole-Life Offering

Romans 12

Psalm 96:8

"Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts".

Groundwork

Welcome to our series on worship. As we work through this series of messages, notes, and discussion questions together, my prayer is that you would experience more and more the wonder of God and grow in your loving response to him. These short "groundwork" sections will help summarize the Sunday messages in a way that helps to see the logic of the study to follow. If you were unable to be present in the Sunday worship service to hear the sermon, I would encourage you to listen online before the study, and the discussion sections will draw on these teaching times.

I. Ascribe

"Ascribe" is not a word that we use very often in our everyday language, but it's a good word. It means to "give to", to "recognize", or to "attribute." The Psalmist says: "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name" (96:8a).

Jesus makes this point about "giving" God what God is due in a brilliant way in his encounter with those who are trying to trap him in Mark 12:13-17. When asked about whether they ought to pay taxes to the Roman overlords, Jesus asks to see a coin. "Whose inscription is on it?" he asks. "Caesars," his interlockers reply. "Then give back to him what is his," but then he says what confounds them all: "Give back to God what is God's." Essentially: "Whose image is on the coin?" Jesus asks. "Caesars". "Great. Give it back to him." But whose image is on *you*? Yes. So give...*that*...back. Give. *You*. Back.

II. We All Worship, All the Time

David Foster Wallace, in his commencement speech *This is Water*, said: "There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we have is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive...If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough...Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you..."

Worship power and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is...they're unconscious. They are default settings." - David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water*

Theologian Harold Best describes our condition this way: "We begin with one fundamental fact about worship: at this very moment, and for as long as this world endures, everybody inhabiting it is bowing

down and serving something or someone – an artifact, a person, an institution, an idea, a spirit, or God through Jesus Christ.” – Harold Best

III. Whole-Life Worship

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will.” Romans 12:1-2

True and proper worship is...

1. Response

So first, “true and proper worship” is response. “Therefore...”. What he says here is deeply tied to all he’s just said. And he spends the first 11 chapters of his letter describing how God’s work of saving and healing work. He emphasizes God’s incredible mercy toward humanity – and stresses how no matter who we are, we all are in need of that mercy.

2. Personal and Communal

“Therefore, I urge you, *brothers and sisters...*” What God does in Jesus restores us in relation to God, *and* each other. Our response is going to involve us personally. Yes. But it always restores relationship to one another.

3. Embodied

True and proper worship, says Paul, is something you do with your *body*. Not just your “soul,” not just in “your mind” – though it includes all of that too. Maybe we could say it like this: your body is where your spirituality “happens.”

Notice how nearly every action he mentions in the rest of the is chapter will require our *bodies*: our hands taking care of those in need, praying and speaking truth with our tongues, rejoicing with those who rejoice – in big fat smiles and shouts of joy...and weeping real, salty-wet tears with those who weep. Blessing – with our hearts and heads and tongues – those who curse us. Pursuing peace and reconciliation through the hard work of face-to-face conversation. *Embodied* actions. That’s *true* worship. Whole-life offered up to him. This includes our times of gathered worship, and all the other “seven-days-of-faith” spaces we inhabit throughout the week.

4. Sacrificial

A “living sacrifice” might seem like an oxymoron at first: sacrifices, both in the Old Testament and in the pagan ceremonies in the ancient Greco-Roman world, involved animals that were *killed* as a sacrifice. But as Paul argued in Romans 6, Jesus has experienced death so that death – and the sin that causes it – might truly and finally die. Jesus then experiences resurrection life on the other side of his death. So, Paul makes the argument: “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” – Romans 6:11.

I can't view worship as one compartment of my life. An act I can "do", then get on with "real life." It means how I use the internet, how I speak to my spouse or kids, how I use my money, all of that is now "bound up" in my response to the God who sacrifices himself for me.

5. Counter-Cultural

This is the first time the word for "renewed" appears in Greek literature. He's speaking about a total transformation of how we look at the world, a "Christ-shaped", "God-soaked" set of lenses, not just a little attitude adjustment. So, this "true and proper worship", it takes our bodies – wholly and totally given back to God and his purposes – and it takes a mind-made-new in terms of our vision of God, and of what life is for. And this all rests on, is in response to, God's incredible mercies toward us.

Discussion

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

Open Up: Recognizing that each person is coming from a different place, what did you think that "worship was all about" when you were a young person? How did that come to change or be deepened? (Encourage each person in the group to share, if even just a few sentences).

Take a moment to read the quote by David Foster Wallace from a speech called "This is Water" (in the groundwork section above). In what ways do you connect with the quote? How does it challenge how you think about worship? (Encourage each person to answer).

Dig In:

1. **Read Romans 12:1-2.** Notice the opening sentence: what is worship always in response to? Why does that matter? How does that reframe how you think about "whole-life" worship?
2. What is Paul urging of Christ followers in v.1? Why do you think it is significant that Paul uses the word "bodies" here? How does that connect with, or challenge, your vision of worship?
3. Why might it matter that we are offering ourselves *to God* in this section? How does that idea sit with you? Why?
4. **Read the rest of Romans 12 (vv.3-21).** How does the command to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice" relate to the rest of the chapter? Why does that matter?
5. In what ways does this text challenge you or call you to engage in "whole-life" worship more deeply? Discuss what that might look like for you to take a step in that direction this week. (Give each group member a chance to answer for themselves).

Prayer:

Take the first minutes of prayer to simply give thanks to God for his mercies. Maybe use Romans 11:33-36 as a starting point for your prayer of adoration. In light of the discussion about Romans 12 and whole-life worship, take time to pray for your group members, perhaps specifically in light of how each person answered question 5. Take some time to ask God to keep showing you ways to offer yourself as a living sacrifice.