

6 Guidelines to Worship

Why does the rain fall down and not up? Why does the sun rise in the east and set in the west? Why do we breathe air and not water? These are not silly questions. Scientists have spent many years looking for the answers. They have found that our universe and everything in it is governed by laws that keep it in order. Without this order there would be no rainfall, no sunsets, no life. These laws of nature are the laws of God, established to govern the universe.

Just as the universe would be in absolute chaos without God's laws and government, our inner lives cannot be in order if His guidelines are not followed. These inner guidelines are God's moral government. They involve spiritual steps or conditions that must be fulfilled for us to please Him. For example, there can be no salvation of a soul if the person does not personally repent and accept Jesus Christ as Savior.

God has also set guidelines in His Word for our worship. We have already studied some of these. Do you remember the three inner qualities a worshipper should have? We learned that they are humility, obedience, and love. We have also studied ways to express our worship—through prayer, service, and music. In this lesson we will prepare ourselves for effective Christian worship.

The Plan

- A. Inner Preparation
- B. Outward Expression

The Goals

1. Identify the inner conditions the Lord requires for worship.
2. Describe characteristics of New Testament worship.

A. INNER PREPARATION

Goal 1. Identify the inner conditions the Lord requires for worship.

The right preparation for worship involves being clean, clear, and uncluttered in our inner lives. We will discuss these in that order although there will always be an overlapping of these conditions when they concern our thoughts and attitudes.

Being Clean

To be clean before God is to stand before Him without sin. Of course that is possible only as God himself forgives and washes our sins away. David sought such help as he prayed: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. (Psalm 51:1–2)

A woman went to church with a headache. When the pastor suggested that she be prayed for, she answered, “No, I cannot be prayed for because I was unkind to my children today, scolding them needlessly.” The pastor gently reminded her that she could ask for God’s forgiveness, accept it, and stand righteous before Him. The woman did so and was instantly healed. Perhaps even greater than her physical healing was the understanding that she could be clean before God just for the asking.

Does that mean we can go our own way, doing whatever we please, since forgiveness comes just for the asking? First John 3:9 answers it: “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.” John reminds us that a Christian cannot willfully sin without affecting his or her standing with God. When this happens, there must be prayerful repentance. When we love Jesus and realize the price He paid for our salvation, we want to remain clean through the Word.

Application

- 1** Circle the letter in front of the correct completion to the sentence. To be clean before God means that we have
- a)** never sinned.
 - b)** tried very hard to be good.
 - c)** prayed and God has forgiven us.
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Being Clear

The apostle Paul said that he was doing his best to reach what lay ahead. “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). In Acts 24:16 he said, “I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.” How can we always have a clear conscience? Some Christians have asked this and then been so afraid of displeasing the Lord that they lived in fear all the time. They have made the mistake of trying to search their own hearts. Psalm 139:23–24 tells us a better way.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

When we let the Lord examine our hearts, He will do it without condemning us. He understands our human weaknesses. Nevertheless, He is holy and righteous and cannot tolerate sin. We can be sure He will let us know if anything has

come between Him and us. Furthermore, He will tell us what to do about it. That is why He has given His Word—to guide, instruct, and lead us in a plain path.

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” (Revelation 22:14–15)

Most of the sins mentioned are easily identified. Practicing magic and idolatry, however, can take on forms not so quickly recognized. Deuteronomy 18:9–13 names practices that resemble some we see in our day, such as reading cards or tea leaves, consulting spirits, or studying horoscopes. If you have books or anything that you used in this kind of practice, you should burn them. Even if you never used them, get rid of them lest they ensnare you.

Many sins, like lying, are so obvious that even a little child knows what they are. But the enemy, the devil, tries to get the believer to trip over these as well. The temptation arises when only a shade of untruth would get us out of difficulty, or help us to earn money.

But we do not need to let these things frighten us. God has promised to keep us from falling and to bring us “faultless and joyful” into His presence (Jude 24).

Application

2 Who is responsible for seeing that I have a clear conscience before God?



Being Uncluttered

We talked about being clean and having things clear between us and God. We are using the word *uncluttered* to describe the little things that are not wrong if put in a proper

place and time, but they can keep us from a close walk with the Lord.

As an example, a Christian lady used her ability to knit as a way to help others. She made warm sweaters for children, heavy winter socks for fishermen, and did mending that few other women knew how to do. Sometimes on stormy nights she read her Bible and then knitted by lamp light until late. Then she stopped going to church because she wanted to knit. The Holy Spirit, however, was faithful to let her see the danger signal before it was too late and once more she put God first in her life. She took time to go to church and still had time enough for knitting.

Many activities that are harmless in themselves could be allowed to steal our time and hinder our walk with God. There is nothing wrong with hunting, playing ball, sewing, reading, and a thousand other activities unless we allow them first place in our lives. Then they will clutter the place and time meant for wholehearted worship of God. Paul speaks of this commitment: I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer 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)

Did you notice the last part of that passage? When we purpose (make up our minds) to worship the Lord with all that is in us, we will know what is good and pleasing to Him. He will help us make a difference between the harmful, the basically harmless, and the good. Our part is to discipline ourselves—to keep ourselves in tune with God. When we do that everything else will take its rightful place. Paul writes again, Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Philippians 4:8)


Application

3 Which activities could keep us from worshipping the Lord wholeheartedly?

- a) Reading good books
- b) Writing letters
- c) Playing games
- d) Working
- e) Traveling
- f) Fishing

4 Why do you suppose Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8 that we should think only good thoughts?

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B. OUTWARD EXPRESSION

Goal 2. Describe characteristics of New Testament worship.

We have talked about the background of true worship—a heart that is right before God—and this of course results in right actions. If we love God and love others we will not hurt them; we will do what we can to help them.

There are, however, things in the foreground, outward expressions of worship that may raise questions in our minds. Do we need to make sacrifices like the Jews did in the Old Testament? Should we bow before images of the apostles or other saints? Is it irreverent to clap our hands in church?

Some of what we do in worship may relate to our culture. Within every society there are certain accepted customs for worship which have become a part of church and life. Unless these contradict scriptural principles, they are not wrong.

The Bible has given guidelines for worship. The Old Testament worshippers were also given specific rules to follow, especially in the offering of sacrifices. We do not follow those

rules today because the sacrifices were symbols or pictures of things to come. The killing of a lamb and the sprinkling of the blood looked forward to Christ. He is the Lamb of God who shed His blood on Calvary for the sins of the world. We do not go through the ritual now because we do not need to. Because we know what it meant, we look back to Calvary to accept the complete and perfect sacrifice already made for us. Hebrews 9 explains,

The first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. . . . When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, . . . For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance. (vv. 1, 11, 15)

The New Testament emphasized the point that only God should be worshipped. John the beloved tells how he fell down to worship a heavenly being, but was stopped with these words: “Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!” (Revelation 19:10).

When Jesus died on the Cross, He opened the way for us to have the same privileges as a priest. We can all go directly to God and worship Him. “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen” (Revelation 1:5–6).

We are free to worship God with all our hearts and that worship may be expressed in many ways. In earlier lessons we talked about prayer, music, singing, waiting, and worshipping by our actions. Are there yet other ways to express our love to the Lord? What about during our private devotions or when we are with other believers and praise wells up in our hearts?

The Holy Spirit helps us in our times of worship. When we are together as a group there will be occasions for singing and clapping our hands for joy. This is scriptural. Psalm 134 proclaims, “Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord . . . Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord” (vv. 134:1–2).

The Bible says of David who danced as the ark of the covenant was being brought home to Jerusalem that he “danced before the Lord with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14). No doubt his joy so overflowed that he could not keep still.

The Lord desires freedom in our worship and our sincere praise. The Holy Spirit wants to move through us to glorify the Father. He will also use our different personalities, for He recognizes us as individuals.

We, too, must remember that not everyone is like us. We react in ways that are part of our personality. One person may not be as quick as another to express his or her feelings. The man who sits quietly may be listening to the Lord, his spirit lifted up to heavenly places with Christ. Another would express praise loudly. Each reacts differently because each has a different personality. Someone once questioned a woman whose feet often danced though she seldom moved out of her place. She came from a family of seven children—all born crippled. No wonder her praise took on the form of a dance!

Those we have mentioned did not show the same outward expressions of worship; nevertheless, each was involved in sincere, heartfelt worship. Our praise will not be irreverent or offensive if we follow the guidelines in Romans 12:10, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.” We must respect other people, their cultures, their personalities, and their walk with the Lord.

Application

- 5** Circle the letter in front of each true statement.
- a)** The Old Testament sacrifices were symbols or pictures of things to come.
 - b)** Images and objects of worship help us keep our minds on the Lord.
 - c)** John the beloved was told not to bow down to a heavenly being, but to worship God.
 - d)** We can all go directly to God and worship Him.

6 Circle the letter in front of each correct completion to the sentence. In the Bible we read of people worshipping the Lord by

- a)** raising their hands.
- b)** dancing before Him.
- c)** screaming as loudly as possible.
- d)** waiting before Him.

7 Have you discovered any new ways to worship the Lord in this lesson? List them.

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Check Your Answers

- 1** c) prayed and God has forgiven us
- 5** a), c), and d) are true.
- 2** I am.
- 6** a) raising their hands.
b) dancing before Him.
d) waiting before Him.
- 3** All of the activities could take first place and hinder our worship; they are good activities as long as they do not come between God and us.
- 7** Your answer
- 4** Your answer. I would say that only good and clean thoughts keep our lives and minds prepared to enter into fellowship with God.