

**Worship Freely**  
**John 4:21-24**  
**July 10, 2022**

**Prayer**

Of all the things I learned in college, the one thing I really regret forgetting is how to solve a Rubik's Cube. Those things were ubiquitous on my campus and so whenever I found one in a person's room or a lobby, I'd causally play with it while we were talking. No one ever took notice because everyone did that. Then, when they weren't looking, I'd solve it and put it back on the shelf. It was always fun to see their response. How did that happen? When did that happen?

What started as a cube with a confusion of colors became a cube where the colors were ordered and put in place. Rather than be divided, the colors were now unified. The cube was restored to the way it's creator had intended it to be. Keep this picture in your mind as we get into today's text.

In John 4:21-24 Jesus was talking with someone He was not supposed to talk to at all.<sup>i</sup> Jesus blew past all those social norms when he asked this woman for a drink of water. Then, with great skill our Lord guided the conversation to a place where they were talking about spiritual things. We pick it up in verse 19.

"Sir," the woman said, "you must be a prophet. <sup>20</sup> So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?"

This was a key point of contention. Both groups had strong reasons for their positions, so strong that some 150 years before this, the Maccabees came and destroyed the Samaritan temple that had been on Gerizim for more than three centuries. Why the animosity?

The Samaritans were Jews who, centuries before, had intermarried with exiles from the Assyrian conquest. In other words, their bloodlines were no longer seen as "pure." Even so, they considered themselves to be better than the Jewish people because they followed only what God gave them through Moses. They saw their faith as being more "pure."

Their only sacred texts were the Books of Moses, the first five books of our Old Testament which Jews call the Torah. Over the years they did take some freedom with the text, changing some words and stories in order to elevate their view of worship and of Mount Gerizim.<sup>ii</sup> What's the problem with this?

We understand how God's revelation is progressive, meaning that God revealed things about Himself and His redemptive plan to Moses and then He also revealed more information to His prophets and others (like King David) which we find in our Old Testament. And finally, the life of Christ becomes the pinnacle of God's self-revelation. Hebrews 1:1-3

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,<sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.<sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

If you want to know what God is like, just look at Jesus.

If all you had were the Five Books of Moses your understanding of God would be incomplete and lacking. It was like the Samaritans had the first chapter of God's master plan for redemption but were missing chapters two through seven.

With all this swirling behind the scenes, the woman broaches the topic of worship. Whose got the right answer? What is the more faithful way to worship God? We pick it up again at verse 21.

Jesus replied, "Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup> You Samaritans know very little about the one you worship, while we Jews know all about him, for salvation comes through the Jews.<sup>23</sup> But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way.<sup>24</sup> For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."

I am struck by two things.

First, I love how Jesus does not start debating a secondary issue. Remaining focused on the main point He used classic prophetic language about a coming time and He adds to it a shocking second element. "Believe me dear woman...the hour is coming [that's the classic language]—indeed it is here now [that's the shocking second element]—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth."

A big change is coming. In fact, the time is already here but not yet fully realized. There is a future expectation that flows out of a present reality and that reality is anchored in one thing that brings this massive change: the presence of Jesus, the Christ.

The first thing that strikes me is that there is something about Jesus' presence that opens the way for us to worship in spirit and in truth.<sup>iii</sup>

The second thing is found in that last line. "God is spirit so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." There is no wiggle room for us here. The word translated *must* can also be translated should or ought or "must by necessity." This line jumps off the page at me and shakes me out of my worship doldrums. Am I worshipping this way?

Jesus' comment is set in opposition to the idea of a proper place for worship. By these words Jesus was telling her, and all of us, that it is possible for us to miss the point. The place we worship, the decorations we associate with worship and the rituals we use in worship are not the main thing.

While we use rituals to express worship, we are not bound to them. Rituals, decoration and locations are important but when they take a primary importance, that's when we lose our way.

Our freedom in worship is centered around why we do it and not where we do it. Clearly, God wants us to worship in spirit and in truth. But what does that actually mean? Let's return to Jesus' words.

A literal translation would be that we are to worship spiritually and truly. Spiritual worship is something God required from the start. Even the Torah requires spiritual involvement in one's worship and not just the outward performance of acts and routines.

So, authentic, spiritual worship involves our spirit. It is an inward change of heart and not just outward observance. What we say and do should match what we feel. Our words, actions and emotions are all supposed to be aligned, they are expected to be the same color.

Hebrews 13:15-16 deepens our understanding a bit here. The author writes,  
<sup>15</sup> Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God [this is living sacrifice worship, here], proclaiming our allegiance to his name [our words and our heart are aligned]. <sup>16</sup> And don't forget to do good and to share with those in need [our actions match what is in our words and heart]. These are the sacrifices that please God.

This is the living sacrifice worship that pleases God (Romans 12:1-2). Suddenly, the practice of worship expands from a holy location or holy activity and engages with the context of everyday living. Yes, we set aside specific times to gather with others at a place for worship, but then that worship spills out into the rest of our lives, 24/7/365.

It is not about where or how we worship. It is about who we are and whose we are and what we live for as the head, the heart and the hands all align in the common purpose of giving glory to God.

Without Jesus giving us His Holy Spirit, we cannot truly worship in spirit. As fallen human beings we are born as an unsolved Rubik's Cube. Few things in our life are aligned with what the Lord desires and most of those things battle against each other.

Think about it this way. Our mind has thoughts. Every one of those thoughts carries a feeling with it. Sometimes that feeling is positive and makes us like the thought. Sometimes that feeling is negative and makes us run from that thought. Every thought has an emotion, and every emotion is connected to a thought. You can't have one without the other.

Alongside these thoughts and feelings, we find the will. Here is the place of power, where decisions are made and things that did not exist are created. We could also call this our heart. It is what we mean when we speak of our spirit and it relates to the executive center of our being. Here is how it works.

You are watching a movie and see a scene where someone makes a milkshake. Your mind has a thought. "It has been years since I had a milkshake." The emotion connected to that thought is positive and draws you closer to that idea. "I like milkshakes, especially when they contain chocolate chips, Oreo cookies and some caramel." Your will then engages this idea and emotion and decides a course of action, "I want a milkshake." This is when your body perks up and says, "On it!"

All the parts of your being are aligned toward the same thing. Now what if the triggering thought is something that is clearly outside of God's desire for His people? Remember, we are talking about a Christian here and so the Holy Spirit is engaged somewhere along this process. (While He can engage us anywhere, I like to think of Him dwelling in that executive center, my heart, and influencing the decisions of the will.)

Let's say you are offended by someone in your small group. Your mind says, "They showed no care for me at all. They must think I'm an idiot!" Your emotion connected with this thought is one of anger or revenge and it feels good, even right. The feeling could also be one of fear and so it has a desire to withdraw and never have to see that person again. The thought and the emotion then engage the will.

If the will agrees and makes a choice to seek revenge or establish distance the body is sent to do or say what is needed. But if the will disagrees, the mind is forced to think again about it. Left on its own it will likely reinforce its position. But what if it goes down a different path?

What if this time it thinks of taking every thought captive in obedience to Jesus and fills in all missing information with what is good and right and pure and lovely and admirable and worthy of praise (2 Cor 10:4-5; Phil 4:8-9). What if the mind remembers Matthew 18 and Romans 12 and the need to go in love to the person who has offended you and seek reconciliation rather than revenge?

All these thoughts are connected to a different emotion and result in a different request going to the will and a different action taken by the body. It results in a different alignment of colors.

Okay, so I think worshipping in spirit has to do with the Holy Spirit enlivening my spirit to fully align my inner world with my outer actions so that the totality of my life freely worships God no matter where I am or what I am doing. What about truth?

Part of the context here has to do with God's revelation in His word so worshipping truly must be connected to the truth God has revealed about Himself and how we are to worship Him.

I think it is important to note here that, like the Samaritans, we all carry a less-than-complete revelation. In this fallen world and before Christ returns, none of us are fully mature with a complete understanding. Yet, no matter what the depth of our understanding is, like the outcast Samaritan woman at the well, God meets us where we are, accepts us as we are, and helps us grow to where He wants us to be.

While truth is definitely connected to scripture, I think it could also point to my authenticity. When I worship truly, I am worshipping God solely for who He is. I seek Him authentically rather than seeking something else—like the applause of people, God's special favor or the meeting of a need.

Worshipping in spirit alone can lead us down paths of our own creation that can take us anywhere. Worshipping in truth alone can lead us down paths of legalism that will take us nowhere. Worshipping in spirit and in truth provides both freedom and guidance in how we give glory to God with all our lives.

The Spirit enlivens and the truth guides. This is worshipping freely, without being bound to a specific time, place or activity. This is the kind of worshipper the Father seeks and He makes it possible for us through the Son.

We are born into this fallen world as unsolved Rubik's Cubes. Somewhere along our journey the Holy Spirit enters our lives. As He begins a conversation with us, He picks up the messed-up colors of our life and begins manipulating the sides, moving the colors around, aligning our thoughts, emotions, will and body—aligning more fully our head, heart and hands—to the character of the One whose image we bear.

Unlike my college experience where my activity was mostly ignored, our task is to pay attention to what the Holy Spirit is doing. Be aware of what is taking place within you and talk to the Lord about it.

Why do I get angry when a person cuts me off in traffic or in mid-sentence? Why do I always look for the shortest line or the fastest lane? Why do I complain so much and think that my way is the best way to get something done? Why do I worry and fret? Why am I so angry?

We may carry these things for years and never think twice about them because they seem to be what is normal and "right." But when the Holy Spirit chooses to highlight words, actions or emotions that are contrary to our Lord's character and teaching, ask Him why and what He wants you to do about it. These "colors" appear when the Holy Spirit turns the cube in a way that gets our attention. When we pause long enough to recognize what He reveals it opens the way for Him to bring the transformation He desires, and we so desperately need.

In this sermon series we've said that worship is when I bring all of who I am to all of who God is and allow that communion to change my life. Ephesians showed us that we worship gratefully, with our eyes to our blessings which brings our knees to the floor.

Last week Romans showed us that we worship as a living sacrifice, with our eyes to His mercies which brings our lives to the altar. This week, Jesus' words in John show us that we worship freely, with our eyes on His continual presence which brings hope to our heart and change to our lives.

Let's close today by practicing our awareness of Christ's presence with us and His Spirit working in us. As you sing this closing song, choose to think about the words your mouth is saying. These are truth, they reflect what is real or what should be real in our lives.

As you hear yourself express these words, monitor your heart. Where do you find strong emotional connection? Where do you find emotional disagreement? Where do things align? Where do they not?

- Is everything else in this world like nothing to me, except the fact that God is?
- When you sing of yourself being God's true son, you are saying that you are a faithful representative of your Father's character and the rightful heir of His estate. Does this represent your conviction and desire? How well is it translated into your day?
- Riches I heed not nor man's empty praise. Do I really put the Lord as of greater value than acquiring wealth?
- Do I view all this world and my life through His lens? Is God truly my vision?

The truth of the words is clear. How aligned is our spirit with God's truth?

If you are like me, there is not much in this song that I can say, "Yep, got that one down!" So, this exercise is not to bury us all in guilt or push us into the slough of despond. This is just practice in one way we can listen to the Holy Spirit and more fully surrender to His work of conforming us into the image of Jesus. This is just one way to learn how to worship in spirit and in truth.

## **Closing Prayer**

Knowing that you are always with us and love us so much that you are willing to meet us where we are and accept us as we are, we ask you now to help us grow to where you want us to be. Today and with every day of the rest of our lives we want to bring all of who we are—with all our ugliness, sin and secrets—to all of who we know you to be.

We surrender to you, Lord. Use this moment and every moment to help us worship you freely no matter where we may be or what we may be doing.

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<sup>i</sup> First of all, she was being ostracized by her community. There was something about her life that required her to draw water alone in the heat of the day rather than with other women in the cool of the morning. Second, she was a woman and in that culture men did not publicly speak to any woman who was not in his family. And finally, she was a Samaritan.

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The Samaritans and the Jews did not like or trust one another. Over a couple of centuries these two people groups had racked up some negative experiences that deeply and negatively impacted how they related to one another.

<sup>ii</sup> The Samaritan Pentateuch differs most dramatically from the Masoretic Text in its exaltation of Mt. Gerizim as the site of Joshua's altar (added as one of the commandments in Exod. 20:17) and the reading of "Gerizim" for "Ebal" at Deut. 27:4. It also protects the oneness of God by changing the word "God" (Elohim) from plural to singular and makes textual changes to protect the honor of Moses and to be more consistent with Samaritan beliefs and practices.

Samaritan religion focuses on five affirmations. Central to their faith is the one God, Yahweh (anglicized as Jehovah). His chief mediator is Moses. The vehicle of the mediation is the Torah. According to their version of the law (Deut. 27:4), Moses, at God's command, instructed Joshua to build an altar on Mt. Gerizim, which thus became the central site of worship for the community. Finally, the Samaritans anticipate a coming Day of Vengeance and Recompense initiated by the Messiah (who was called Taheb).

They held in common with Judaism a strong monotheistic faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In contrast, however, there was an elevating of Mt Gerizim in the north as the only holy place for sacrifice, based on several divergent passages in Deuteronomy and Exodus in the Samaritan text. Mt Gerizim came to be identified with the site of Abel's first altar (Gn 4:4), the site of Noah's sacrifice after the flood (8:20), the meeting place of Abraham and Melchizedek (14:18), the site of Isaac's intended sacrifice (ch 22), and many other associations. (Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible and Bakers Encyclopedia of the Bible)

<sup>iii</sup> Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension and His sending of the Holy Spirit inaugurates a new phase in redemptive history. God's kingdom arrived when King Jesus ascended to His throne and it exists today wherever Jesus is acknowledged at the One with authority. At the same time, the Kingdom in its fullest sense still belongs to the future when Jesus returns to redeem all creation by establishing a new heaven and new earth. All of human and redemptive history relies on Jesus.