

iWorship

Responsive Reading, “iWorship”¹

I’m not sure I actually planned these last three iMessages this carefully, but it seems to me that the order of these last three sermons may be more than accidental. It really is true that repentance comes before worship, which comes before Hope.

We aren’t really able to worship God “*in the Spirit and in truth*” (John 4:23) until we’ve repented of our Sin and been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. And it’s not until we learn to worship God with every aspect of our lives that we finally discover a Hope that will not disappoint us. Last week, of course, we looked at iRepent. This week we look at iWorship; and next week we’ll consider iHope. So off we go!

Baptists have pretty much always been about missions. Indeed, William Carey, the “father of modern missions,” was an English Baptist. But surprising as it may seem at first, **missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is.**

John Piper has pointed out that **missions exists because worship doesn’t**. We were created to worship God, and missionary endeavor exists to lead persons into lives of worship after they’ve been born a second time through God’s Spirit. “When this present age is over,” Piper wrote, “and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more . . . but worship abides forever.”²

Worship, of course, is not just about what happens in the front of the sanctuary. Worship is about what happens personally in each of our hearts as we are in God’s Presence. There is one, and only one, audience for worship, and that audience is our creating, sustaining, forgiving, and redeeming God. When we truly experience the Presence of God, we fall to our knees, both literally and figuratively, as will every other creature in the universe on that Great Day when our Lord returns (Philippians 2:10-11).

Much of what I’ll say about worship this morning applies to private worship as well as to corporate worship. Indeed, the word “corporate” comes from the Latin word that means “body,” and it refers to our worship together as the Body of Christ. Corporate worship is simply the gathering of our personal worship into shared experience—into “Body Life.” Corporate worship is vitally important for our spiritual growth. While we can certainly worship in solitude, what generally shapes us most is consistent participation with the people of God in corporate worship week by week.

Don McMinn agreed with John Piper when he wrote that “Worship is the central issue in the universe. It is the hub around which all other concerns revolve. . . . Worship is the zenith of life—it is the ultimate experience, and there is nothing beyond.”³

When Jesus was asked to identify the most important commandment, His answer identified worship as the key to everything else: “*The most important one,*” He said, “*is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.**’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these*” (Mark 12:29-31).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on September 9, 2012.

² John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 11.

³ Don McMinn, *Practice of Praise*, pp. 61-62.

You probably know that Jesus took these two commandments from the Torah, or the Law of Moses. The first commandment comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, while the second comes from Leviticus 19:18.

In another well-known encounter, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that “*a time is coming and has now come when the **true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth**, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth*” (John 4:23-24).

It seems reasonable to me to conclude that worshiping God “*with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength*” describes the same thing as worshiping God “*in the Spirit and in truth,*” so I’m going to treat these ideas as more or less synonymous. I want to focus on the First Commandment this morning, and here’s the basic outline of how I see these relating to each other:

HEART = LOVING	(passion; commitment; yearning)
SOUL = BEING	(self; will; psyche; spirit; unconscious mind)
MIND = KNOWING	(intellect; rationality; conscious mind)
STRENGTH = DOING	(power; resources; ability; skill; time)

Let’s look at “**heart**” first. We sometimes talk about athletes playing “with heart,” or we speak of actors “putting their hearts” into a role, and it seems to me that what we generally mean by such statements is that persons are playing, acting, performing, or doing whatever else with *passion*. They’re putting themselves completely into what they’re doing, holding nothing back.

If we were to apply this idea to art, persons who can “take art or leave it” don’t usually create much art—at least, not great art. I’ve told you before about the scene in Irving Stone’s novel, *The Agony & the Ecstasy* (1961), where Michelangelo’s friend Soggi tries to persuade him to abandon his study of sculpture and to pursue something more profitable:

“After all,” Soggi notes, “sculpture is the last art form to be commissioned by the wealthy families of Florence. There is no money in it and no future. It is the last of the luxuries, at the very bottom of the list.” Michelangelo answers, “Sculpture is at the top of my list, Soggi. In fact, there is no list. I say ‘sculpture,’ and I’m finished.”

Or how about music? Johann Sebastian Bach was a master of worship music whose genius has probably never been equaled. His organ music is even at this moment playing a key part in drawing people to Christ in Japan. As Yuko Maruyama, formerly a Buddhist, put it, “When I play [one of Bach’s fugues], I can feel [him] talking to God.”⁴ Indeed, Bach’s cantatas so winsomely communicate the Gospel that Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931) famously called Bach’s cantatas, “The Fifth Gospel.”⁵

When we talk about “loving God with all your heart,” we’re talking about loving God “with heart,” with passion, with yearning, with longing, as a lover longs for the beloved. The psalmist wrote, “*I long for the Lord more than sentries long for the dawn*” (Psalm 130:6, NLT); and again, “*If you are silent, I might as well give up and die*” (Psalm 28:1, NLT).

⁴ Uwe Simon-Netto, “Bach in Japan,” *Christian History & Biography* (Summer 2007). Bach wrote the letters, “SDG” at the end of each of his cantatas, which stood for *Soli Deo Gloria*, or “To the glory of God alone.”

⁵ *Ibid.*

My friend, could you honestly say that you're passionately in love with God? Could you describe your relationship with God as the psalmist did? Worshiping "with heart" is the first step of worshiping "*in the Spirit and in truth.*"

The second dimension of worship is "with all your **soul.**" In the biblical understanding, a person does not "have" a soul. A person "is" a soul. "Soul" has to do with life, with essence, with emotion, and with will.⁶

What does it mean to love God "with all your soul"? The word used here is the same word from which we get "psyche" and "psychology," and the idea is that we love God with our emotions and with our will. To love God "with soul" means that our love for God becomes so pervasive that even our unconscious awareness is shot through with this passion.

Following Jesus is not one allegiance to be added to other allegiances. Following Jesus is not one commitment among many. This commitment is exclusive and preeminent. "*If you want to be my follower,*" Jesus said, "*you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children [and grandchildren], brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life. . . . **No one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me**" (Luke 14:26, 33, NLT).*

If we love God with all our souls, we don't say, "Lord, I'll follow you, but first let me do this or that." Jesus took a very dim view of such commitment (Luke 9:59-62). The fact is that delayed obedience is disobedience. We see this easily in our children, but we sometimes have a hard time seeing it in ourselves.

I think it's significant that as Abraham left his servants to take Isaac alone to the mountain of sacrifice, he told them, "*Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will **worship** and then **we** will come back to you*" (Genesis 22:5). Abraham's almost unbelievable commitment to God still inspires us nearly 4,000 years later.

It's significant that as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stood before Nebuchadnezzar and faced his blazing furnace, they said, "*If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. **But even if he does not,** we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up*" (Daniel 3:17-18). That's serving God with all of your life and will.

When my missionary friend was visiting with persecuted Christians in China, he was introduced to some young men at a secret gathering about whom one of the older leaders said, "They have potential for leadership in the church, but they need more maturity. They haven't been to prison yet."

My friend, how determined are you to worship God with your whole being, with all that you are, no matter what it costs? That's what it means to worship God with "*all your soul.*"

The third characteristic of worship that Jesus gave us is that we love God "*with all our **minds.***" Jesus actually added this to the passage from Deuteronomy, which only mentions "heart, soul, and strength."

Joanne Weil's elementary son once asked her what the highest number was to which she'd ever counted. When she said she didn't know, he said his highest number was 5,372.

⁶ Christian Wolf, "Soul," in the *Holman Bible Dictionary*, ed. Marsha Ellis Smith (Nashville: Holman, 1991).

When she asked why he'd stopped at that number, he answered, "Church was over."⁷ Well, that's not loving God with your mind, and it may have been related to a sermon that failed the test, too.

What does it mean to love God "*with all your mind*"? This obviously has to do with our conscious, rational faculties, with our reflective and analytic abilities. It's awfully easy to spend our lives becoming more and more knowledgeable in our chosen fields of expertise, whether this is business, banking, medicine, real estate, or whatever else, while leaving our wisdom in spiritual matters pretty much at the same place it was when we were children. That's what J. B. Phillips was getting at in his book, *Your God is Too Small*.⁸

Loving God with your mind means not just reading the Bible but studying it. Loving God with your mind means taking the time to read significant spiritual books and journals, not being satisfied with the pop theology found online and in stores.

I could suggest any number of theologically astute books that would challenge the best minds among us—indeed, they challenge the best minds in the world. There's nothing about mature faith that requires intellectual apology, and while we're not going to have full understanding on this side of eternity, the better we understand what God *has* revealed, the more truly amazing it all is. Love God with your mind.

Finally, Jesus told us that loving God with "*all our strength*" is the fourth key component of worshipping "*in the Spirit and in truth*," making the full prescription **LOVING, BEING, KNOWING**, and now **DOING**. True worship leads us to commit our entire lives—all that we have and all that we are—to obeying God's commands. Bob Logan has noted that "The essence of worship is acknowledging the Lordship of Christ in our lives. The biggest deterrent to worship is personal kingdoms that we refuse to give over to Christ."⁹

Let me ask you a very personal question. If Jesus had meaningful sovereignty over what you've got, what would He do with it? If Jesus lived among us, what kind of car would He drive? Where would He live? For my part, I resolved long ago never to drive a car so nice that it might keep me from being a Good Samaritan, never to hold anything so tightly that I wouldn't give it away if God prompted me to do so, and to do my best to avoid obligating God's resources beyond where I have God's guidance for their deployment.

It's perhaps at the point of loving God with all our strength that the matter of stewardship comes into clearest focus. It's really not too difficult to surrender all that we are and have to God in the idealistic years of our youth when we don't have anything. It's a lot harder to surrender all that we have and are to God when we're much older and success has brought us a lot. But putting our resources at God's disposal is still what it means to love God with all our strength, whether we have much or little.

All of this "heart, soul, mind and strength" stuff sets a pretty high bar, doesn't it? Jesus doesn't mess around when He calls us to follow him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship* that when Jesus calls us, He calls us to come and die.¹⁰ That's what Paul meant when he wrote, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Galatians 2:20).

⁷ Joanne Weil, in Mike and Amy Nappa, *Bore No More! 70 Creative Ways to Involve Your Audience in Unforgettable Bible Teaching* (Group Publishing, 1995), p. 7.

⁸ J. B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

⁹ *Releasing Your Church's Potential*, 6-3.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Nazi Germany, 1937).

Such high commitments do have a sobering singularity about them, but such commitments do not result in a dilution or an excision of joy from our lives. No, far from diminishing our joy, such high commitments increase our joy many times over, as we transfer our treasure to heaven, where alone it is truly safe (Matthew 6:19-24)!

As we think about worshiping God “*in the Spirit and in truth,*” we need to ask ourselves whether our passion for Jesus been tamed and domesticated by our desire for safety and comfort. The disciple who takes seriously his or her commitment to Christ will have to learn to travel light, giving up some particular involvements in order to make other commitments more truly central.

But do you know what? A singular commitment to living out these two Great Commandments is the only way to discover for ourselves that life in Christ begins in Love, continues in Joy, and ends at Home. Each of us chooses every day either to be a casual Christian whose life’s effort is destined for fire and ashes (1 Corinthians 3:12-15), or to be a member of the Company of the Committed, who will kneel at last and hear the glad words, “*Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!*” (Matthew 25:21).

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Leader: *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:1-3).*

People: ***Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your god with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).***

Leader: *Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him. Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. Tremble before him, all the earth! (1 Chronicles 16:29-30a).*

People: ***Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care (Psalm 95:6-7).***

Leader: *Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture (Psalm 100:1-3).*

People: ***Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations (Psalm 100:4-5).***

Leader: *“A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24).*

People: ***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 (Romans 12:1).***

Leader: *Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts (Colossians 3:16).*

People: ***And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

People: **Thanks be to God!**