



Central Peninsula Church

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Romans 12:1-2
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The Elements of Authentic Worship

SERIES: *Understanding the Church*

This morning we're going to continue in our series on the priorities of the Church and our focus, you may have already guessed, is the ministry of Worship. Now unlike some of you I'm not a big internet guy but I recently figured out how to log on to CPC's web site and if you were to go on there and explore the section on CPC's core values you would discover this paragraph regarding worship. "Worship should be focused on heartfelt response to the unchanging God while remaining sensitive to our contemporary culture. Worshiping and enjoying God is perhaps the greatest of all callings for the church. Proper worship engages both our mind and our heart, and it cultivates a balanced sense of awe and intimacy in our approach to God. To effectively draw us into the presence of God, our worship style should be culturally relevant while remaining theologically pure."

Now that's a well thought out and well written paragraph regarding worship at CPC, and we're going to refer back to it this morning. But as we begin I want to take exception with one small but significant element. I haven't spent a lot of time with the Elders on this so I may be getting myself in trouble, but this morning as we look at the place of worship in the life of the church we really need to delete the word "perhaps" from the second sentence. Because folks, there's really no question about it: Worship IS the greatest and most significant calling in the life of the church.

All other aspects of Christian life - our praying, our reading, our giving, our serving, our singing, our confessing, witnessing, the various ministries of the church, preaching, teaching, communion - are not only meaningless, they are actually offensive to God unless they are the by product of true spiritual worship. Ray Stedman put it this way: "Since the first century the churches of the world have recognized a threefold mission: Worship, evangelism, and edification. But of these three the greatest is surely worship because true worship is the source of the other two. The proclamation of the good news to the lost and the building up of the church by the maturing of each believer flows from hearts that are made warm and vital by the worship of the living God."

So let me just say it again this morning: Worship IS the greatest of all callings for the church, and I would add it is the most significant activity we can engage in as followers of Christ. But showing up to a worship service doesn't make us worshippers: singing songs, praying, even listening to the scriptures are activities of worship. But just because we participate in them doesn't mean that we are automatically worshipping.

A few weeks ago Nancy and I celebrated our 27th wedding anniversary. And we've done various things to celebrate over the years but our default seems to be to hang out in Los Gatos for a half a day and then make our way down to Santa Cruz or Capitola for a late lunch or early dinner. And I

have to tell you this year we had the greatest time just being together. And as usual, this year we spent a lot of time reminiscing, in a sense reliving through shared memories and stories the events that are central to our relationship. We talk about our wedding day, we usually talk about the big argument we had the night before. We talk about our honeymoon, our first apartment, the birth of our children, our trip through Texas in a pickup truck. We remember and we celebrate the significant place we have occupied in each other's lives. And in a very real sense, that's what we do as we gather together to worship. We remember together through story, through song, through the scriptures, through prayer. We remember together the events that are central to our relationship with God. And we celebrate the significant place that God Himself occupies in our lives. But you know what, it's possible for me to go through all the motions of my anniversary without being present with my wife. And it's just as possible for us to show up and participate in the activities of "worship" without ever worshipping at all.

So this morning we want to look at the elements of authentic worship and explore what it means to be a genuine worshipper of the living God. So turn with me to Romans chapter 12 and we'll look together at verse 1. **"I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."**

Now I think it's pretty clear that Paul is commending us to what we might call "a lifestyle of worship" here, where all of life is perceived as an offering of worship unto God. That's why he says we are to present our bodies (representing all that we are) as a living, holy, and acceptable sacrifice of worship to God. So our speaking, our working, our relationships, our driving, our possessions, our families; every aspect of life is lived out as an expression of worship to God. And while there is much we could say this morning about worship as a lifestyle, we are going to look at the elements of true worship that are so important for us to grasp when it comes to our corporate experience as we gather together to worship God.

And the first quality that we find can be expressed this way: responding.

Responding

Worship is a response to who God is and to what He has done. In worship we are first and foremost responding to God's character and His initiative in our lives.

That's the burden of the apostle Paul at this point in the book of Romans, which is the major division of the book where Paul moves from theology to the practical side of living our theology out in real life. So he says, **"I urge you brethren. . . I implore, I beseech, I plead with you. . . by the mercies of God."** The NIV translates this "in view of God's mercies." Worship Him as a lifestyle. In view of God's mercies. . . then worship Him! In fact Paul himself has just barely recovered his

breath from an outburst of worship where he just could not contain himself. And this clear teacher and writer gets carried away in worship as he considers the mercy of God in sending us His Son. If you have a Bible turn just a few verses before where Paul is explaining about the wonders of God's grace to save Gentiles. In verse 11:32-33, look at verse 33: **"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen!"**

So Paul himself is overwhelmed in worship: in view of who God is and what God had done he simply cannot contain himself. Worship breaks out.

So what is the response of true worship? A young student writes this account of what happened in the class on one particular test day...

Finally it was time to take the test. "Leave them face down on the desk until everyone has one, and I'll tell you to start," our professor, Dr. Tom Hufty, instructed.

When we turned them over, to my astonishment every answer on the test was filled in. My name was even written on the exam in red ink. The bottom of the last page said: "This is the end of the exam. All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an A on the final exam. The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get the A. You have just experienced ... grace."

Dr. Hufty then went around the room and asked each student individually, "What is your grade? Do you deserve the grade you are receiving? How much did all your studying for this exam help you achieve your final grade?"

Then he said, "Some things you learn from lectures, some things you learn from research, but some things you can only learn from experience. You've just experienced grace. One hundred years from now, if you know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, your name will be written down in a book, and you will have had nothing to do with writing it there. That will be the ultimate grace experience."

Gratitude and Humility

Now what do you think would have been the response of those students once they got over the initial shock? Well, the first response of course was gratitude: gratitude for the incredible free gift, **gratitude** for grace! They got an undeserved "A." The creator of the test took it for them so they were grateful. So in the face of grace "gratitude is a natural and authentic response." But there is another kind of response that would have also been stirred. Because as the professor came around the room and asked the questions, one by one they were forced to admit that there was nothing they had done to contribute to having

received this incredible grace. So the experience stirred a deep sense of **humility** as well.

And in worship we respond in exactly the same way: first in humility. Listen to what Paul writes about the human condition earlier in Chapter 3: **"There is none righteous, not even one, there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. . ."**

So apart from God, man is fundamentally and profoundly screwed up, which is the modern equivalent of saying "we are dead in our trespasses and sins." Humility is our proper response in light of the "nothing" that we contribute. But listen to this: **"But God who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ: by grace you have been saved!"** (Eph. 2:4).

You see, the creator of the test takes the test for us by sending His Son in our place. Our names are in the book, and we had nothing to do with writing it there! And all we can do is bow before our God in overwhelming humility and delighted gratitude for who He is and what He has done. That's the response of true worship:

Offering a Sacrifice of Praise

And true worship involves the offering of a sacrifice to God. Let's look again at Rom. 12:1: **"I urge you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual/reasonable act of worship."**

Now I doubt that anyone here brought their lamb or bull or goat to be sacrificed this morning. That's a good thing; it would really mess up the carpets! But the fact is we no longer drag our animals to church because God has provided a sufficient sacrifice for our sin, the spotless Lamb of God his Son. So our offering is no longer a sacrifice of atonement for sin but it's a sacrifice of praise unto God. The author of Hebrews says: **"Through Him then, let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that gives thanks to His name."** That means that as we sing and pray and open our ears and heart to God's Word we are actually participating in an offering of worship and praise to God. You see, we're not here to be entertained or to be educated with more bible facts. We're here primarily to offer our sacrifice of praise to God. So what is this sacrifice of praise we bring?

Jesus once sat by a well talking to a woman with a questionable background about worship and He said to her: "But the hour is coming and now is, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such to worship him." The Father is seeking true worshippers who worship in spirit and truth. And that is how we are to come to worship Him.

Our own statement on worship reflects this truth when it says: "Proper worship engages both our mind and our heart." There it is, spirit and truth. We might say it engages both our emotions and intellect.

Our Minds

So that means that to be a true worshipper my mind must be actively engaged. I've got to be prepared, alert, awake, in order to worship God. That means I'm careful with how I exhaust myself the night before, I guard my mind so that it is fresh to receive the Word. I actively listen to the words I sing and I soak in the truths that are being spoken, prayed and sung throughout

the service. I eagerly long for truth to anchor me and guide me in the decisions and the struggles and fears that we face.

Our Emotions

But I worship God with my emotions as well. My emotions are to be open and vulnerable, receptive, and eager as I come to worship God.

John Piper was invited to address a church one morning and he noticed before he got up that the worship was dull, lifeless, and disengaged. So when he got up he asked this question: "How many of you grew up in homes where a regular, significant part of family life was a glad-hearted singing to the Lord?" About 10 percent raised their hands. Then he asked, "How many of you grew up in homes where spontaneous praise and thanks for each other was more common than correction and criticism?" Even fewer hands were raised.

Here's his conclusion: "In the homes we grew up in probably 90 percent of us were hindered as much as helped to feel and express emotions of thanks and love and praise in a natural and authentic way. Add to that that we are all sinners with fallen natures that do not naturally delight in God and goodness and beauty and truth. Put those two together (our fallen nature, and our critical, unpraising, songless families) and you have most of the explanation for the emotional disabilities we bring to worship!" Then he goes on: But "the point is that we need not be satisfied with the way we are. There ought to be a holy dissatisfaction with whatever our own personal emotional disability is. We should seek to grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ emotionally as well as spiritually and morally. We should refuse to settle for the emotional limp inherited from our parents, as though God were unable to heal and strengthen us. The most powerful worship will be among people whose minds linger in the light of truth and whose hearts - whose emotions - are as near to the fire of God as they can be without being consumed."

Let me say to you this morning if you worship with an emotional limp, don't settle for the way things are. Confess your brokenness and your emotional barrenness to the Lord. He is able to break through the barriers of your past and overcome your sin and flood your heart - your emotions - so that you can truly delight in who He is and what He has done!

Contemporary Style

And by the way, this is one of the reasons why we at CPC have committed ourselves to express the timeless truths of God in ways that are sensitive to our contemporary culture. And though we occasionally use the great hymns of the faith in our worship we primarily rely on contemporary forms of expression. Now I need to stress that this is not a biblical mandate. The Bible does not say go therefore and sing contemporary praise songs. Nor does it say, thou shalt only sing hymns with Thee and Thou. The beauty of the body of Christ throughout the world is the tremendous diversity of its worship.

But we here at CPC have chosen to take the most culturally relevant forms as our primary expressions in worship. Because they convey the truth of God in a style that is both intellectually and emotionally most accessible to modern man. You know I once read a biography of America's most famous and prolific hymn writer by the name of Fanny Crosby. She was blinded as an infant and was said to have written somewhere around 5,000 hymns (most of them were written in the 1800's), hymns that included Blessed Assurance and Near the Cross. But

Fanny's songs were not well received by everyone. In fact, back then, they would actually write reviews of songs much like we have movie critics today. And the Ebert and Roper's of her day would often give her hymns two thumbs down. She was frequently told that her hymns were too sentimental and too simple and they were said to be too lacking in theological content to be appropriate for the church. But at the popular level, for a contemporary audience - her songs were deeply stirring and meaningful.

You see, it was her vision to make worship accessible to her contemporaries. She chose to leave behind the tight structures that were characteristic of earlier and established hymn writers and instead she used the common rhythms, melodies and popular poetry style of the day. Why? Because she believed that worship was best encouraged through popular, contemporary and accessible forms. And that's where we have landed here at CPC as well.

Our Bodies

So we worship God with our minds and our emotions fully engaged. But I believe that the scriptures are clear that we are to worship God with our bodies as well. The scriptures actually have a lot to say on this issue. In fact, the primary word for worship in the Old Testament literally means to "make oneself prostrate: to lie face down." The scriptures describe various physical expressions of worship and praise; clapping hands and dancing are among the many. But the most common are lifting of hands and bowing down or kneeling. And we just have time this morning to talk about lifting hands. You know, I used to think that lifting my hands in worship was the first step to something completely out of control. Somehow with my background I associated it with certain excesses. I thought of it as something that was undignified and inappropriate for worship. But you know what I found out; it's biblical, it's a practice that is as ancient as our faith. And the scriptures encourage and even command the lifting of hands because we were created with bodies to give him praise.

We could actually spend a whole morning on this alone. But here are a few passages for starters. In Psalm 88:9 the Psalmist holds out his hands to receive the gift of God's grace. When he says: **"I call to you, O Lord, everyday; I spread out my hands to you."** In Psalm 134 the believer postures his faith through the symbol of raised hands. **"Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord!"** Here's a familiar one from Nehemiah. **"Then Ezra blessed Yahweh the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, while lifting up their hands then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground."** And in the N.T. Paul writes: **"I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing..."**

Now of course we can raise hands (or do anything in worship for that matter) for all the wrong reasons. But the scriptures make it clear that the lifting of hands is an appropriate way to express physically the intent of the heart in worship. I saw an interview a while back with Renée Zelweiger and she was asked about her dancing in the movie *Chicago*. Apparently she had never danced in a role before. She remarked that the physical expression of dancing got her

so much more in touch with the words and the emotions of the song. The content and the emotions were made alive through physical movement. That's the way we are made. We were made with minds, emotions, and bodies bound together to respond to God worship.

Here's what Eugene Peterson says on the matter: "We are invited to bless the Lord; we are commanded to bless the Lord. And then someone says, 'but I don't feel like it. And I won't be a hypocrite. I can't bless the Lord if I don't feel like blessing the Lord. It wouldn't be honest.' The biblical response to that is: Lift up your hands in the holy place and bless the Lord! You can lift up your hands regardless of how you feel; it is a simple motor movement. You may not be able to command your heart, but you can command your arms. Lift your arms in blessing, just maybe your heart will get the message and be lifted up also in praise. We are psychosomatic beings; body and spirit are intricately interrelated. Go through the motions of blessing God and your spirit will pick up the cue and follow along. 'For why do men lift their hands when they pray? Is it not that their hearts may be raised at the same time to God?'"

So if you find yourself disengaged in worship this morning or dulled in your spirit, may I encourage you Lift up your Hands in worship and Praise the Lord. You might be surprised at the emotions that may be dislodged just by engaging in the simple physical act of worship.

So authentic worship involves a wholehearted response of humility and gratitude to God as we offer our sacrifice of praise, with our minds, our emotions, and our bodies.

And finally, worship is an expectation for the presence of God.

Expecting

It's a curious thing but I find that when I show up for my anniversary, when I'm fully present with my wife, something wonderful happens. She shows up too. And if I am distant and guarded or just preoccupied, suddenly the warmth of relationship is dissipated and dulled. But when I'm present - wow - intimacy grows when we are present and available to one another. It's a great thing.

And you know what, when we sing and pray and worship with open hearts and attentive minds, God shows up to meet with us. Go back for a minute to Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well. Remember what he offered this broken, lonely woman. He said to her: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." That is Jesus' promise to all who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. As we wholeheartedly worship Him the waters of His presence begin to fill us, satisfying our needs, quenching our thirsty souls, and rehydrating the dry and parched places of our hearts. And He meets with us in His cleansing fire as well, to purify our hearts, to cleanse us, restore us, heal us and redeem us with His Holy love. God meets with us in our worship!

We are officially empty nesters these days. At least until this summer. But one of the greatest memories I

have of when my kids were little was the greeting I got when I'd come in the door at night. I'd hit the door and sometimes I'd hear this thunder coming down the hall as the kids came running from their rooms to greet me, jumping into my arms to tell me how much I was missed. Sometimes just the thought of that greeting kept me going all day long. That's the Father's heart for us in worship. He longs for us to come running into His open arms. Some of you don't even know that it's ok to come like that to God. Well, you can. And God loves it when we come running and jumping into His arms with a kind of childlike abandon just to enjoy His presence all over again and tell Him how much we love Him. God loves that kind of worship, and He meets with us to affirm our hearts with His love, to quiet our fears, to soothe our anxieties, to embrace us in His strength, and shelter us in the safety of His arms. And in the embrace of worship He stirs us to Holiness deep within. God meets us and greets us when we come to Him in authentic worship!

So I encourage you today folks: Come to worship. Yes, come for the youth group, come for Sunday school, come for the recovery programs, come for fellowship, come to be informed in the truths of scripture. But folks, come to Worship; Worship is the greatest calling of the Church and the most significant activity we can engage in as followers of Christ.

Come with and respond to God for who He is and what He has done. Come in humility and gratitude, with attentive minds, alert and ready, with warm and tender hearts, open and vulnerable before Him, with expressive bodies, lifting your hands, using the bodies he has created as an instrument of adoration and praise! And come expecting the power of His presence to touch your life as you run to greet Him in the intimate embrace of worship.

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