

# Who Determines Acceptable Worship?

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[0:00] So, last week we began a study of worship. Does God care how we worship? If so, how should we worship under the new covenant? What does the Bible teach us about worshiping in the church today?

And last time I attempted to show that God does in fact care how we worship. Now, this is very obvious when we read through the Old Testament and we see all of the rules and commandments that God gave Israel regarding their worship of Him. They are very detailed, very precise instructions with some pretty heavy consequences attached to them if somebody should disobey those commandments.

For example, Leviticus 10 tells us the story of Nadab and Abihu who were priests serving in the tabernacle and were told, now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them.

And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, this is what the Lord has said, among those who are near me, I will be sanctified and before all the people, I will be glorified.

So when these men took it upon themselves to worship God in a way other than God Himself had directed, they were immediately punished by death. And God says, among those who are near me, I will be sanctified or I will be treated as holy.

[1:41] And that's just one example. In Deuteronomy 4, regarding worship, God tells the people of Israel in verse 2, you shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.

In 1 Samuel 15, the Lord told King Saul to destroy the Amalekites completely, the people, the livestock, everything. But Saul, he decides to spare the best of their livestock, claiming that he only wanted to use them as sacrifices to God.

That sounds noble, right? Sounds good. But Samuel comes along and says to him, has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord?

Now that speaks volumes because it tells us that worship alone is not what God desires from His people. He desires our worship, but not our worship alone.

Our worship of Him is only as good as our obedience to Him. If our worship goes outside the bounds of what He has commanded, He will not accept it.

[3:00] Of course, all of these examples are within the time of tabernacle worship, when the ceremonial laws were enforced, which some would argue is practically irrelevant to the Christian church today.

And it is certainly true for many of the specifics of tabernacle worship, those types and shadows which were fulfilled by Christ. But there's an eternal principle flowing from our eternal God in all of this.

And that is that God, first of all, does care how we worship Him. And second, only He can prescribe what is acceptable worship.

And we saw that last time in the case of Cain and Abel. Before there was a ceremonial law, before there was tabernacle worship, God accepted Abel's worship and rejected Cain's worship.

We also see this principle in the Ten Commandments, which are part of God's eternal moral law, not part of a temporary ceremonial law. And though the commands are stated negatively, thou shalt not, God is very clear that only He can determine what is acceptable worship of Him.

[4:19] But still, some might get hung up on the fact that I've only provided examples from the Old Testament. It's a sad reality today that many professing Christians tend to think of the Old Testament as irrelevant.

Or at the very least, we tend to pick and choose what's relevant. However, we shouldn't forget that the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, is one unified story from beginning to end.

The Old Testament is not merely background information. Paul in the New Testament says, whatever was written in former days, that is, the Old Testament, was written for our instruction. And of course, Jesus says, you search the Scriptures, the Old Testament, because you think in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness about me. So, we don't have all of the instructions we need, and we don't even have the full story of Christ without the Old Testament. Even so, let's move ahead to the New Testament and see whether or not God still cares about how we worship under the New Covenant.

[5:35] So, if you will, go with me to Matthew chapter 15. Matthew chapter 15. Since some people seem to think of Jesus as liberating us from strict worship, where God dictates how we worship Him, let's see what Jesus says about it.

So, by the time we come to Matthew 15, Jewish leaders, over many years, had developed a series of laws and commandments that were imposed in addition to God's law.

In their minds, they were creating a fence around God's commandments to ensure that no one violated God's commandments. So, for example, the fourth commandment forbade people from working on the Sabbath, right?

So, to ensure that no one would break that Sabbath commandment, first they created 39 categories of work. And then they developed a host of rules for each of those categories.

So, for example, writing and erasing were considered work in the Jewish Mishnah. And they determined that no one should write more than two individual letters on the Sabbath.

[6:52] And don't even think about cheating by erasing those letters and writing two more, because now you've written four letters and you have violated the Sabbath. They developed a rule that said no one could travel farther than 2,000 cubits, or roughly three quarters of a mile from your home on the Sabbath.

But they also created loopholes. So, let's say you had a fence that was less than 2,000 cubits from your home. You could travel all the way to that fence and then 2,000 cubits farther.

And on and on it goes. Now, this is the context of Jesus' public ministry. This is what he's dealing with every time he has a confrontation with the Pharisees about breaking the Sabbath, among other issues.

So, when we come to a story like this one in Matthew 15, we might be tempted to think that the Pharisees, they're so strict about how we worship God, and they were wrong.

And Jesus, what he's trying to do is liberate people from that strictness, as though Jesus is arguing against God's law. Now, no one would frame it that way, because we know that Jesus would not.

[8:06] And did not ever contradict God's law. In fact, he says in Matthew 5, Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

And yet, we may still think that Jesus corrected the Pharisees because they were overly scrupulous in their application of God's law. No, in fact, Jesus actually corrects them because they were too lax about God's law.

Let me show you. This is Matthew 15. Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?

For they do not wash their hands when they eat. He answered them, And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.

But you say, if anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.

[9:18] So for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God, you hypocrites. Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said, This

people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. Now, the first thing to notice here is how Jesus ties this entire conversation to the subject of worship.

He does that in verses 8 and 9 when he applies a passage from the book of Isaiah. So regardless of what the Pharisees or the Lord's disciples or even we might have thought, Jesus treats this particular controversy as a matter of worship.

Now, the second thing to notice is that the Pharisees don't even pretend to be arguing for God's law. They ask, Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?

Of course, the tradition in question here is ceremonial hand washing, which was not really about hygiene. This was a religious practice to supposedly prevent people from eating their meals with impure hands.

[10:35] And how does Jesus respond to this? Does he accuse them of applying God's law too strictly? No, he accuses them of breaking God's law.

In the case of the Pharisees, they're so determined to protect God's ceremonial laws that they've invented new traditions that have actually caused people to break God's moral law.

Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? So the example Jesus uses is a tradition known as Corban.

So let's say a man's parents need financial help in their old age. Well, the fifth commandment says, Honor your father and your mother.

In other words, that man should absolutely help his parents. But instead, he vows that all of his money is dedicated to the Lord.

[11:37] Now, that doesn't mean he rushes down to the temple treasury and donates everything he has. In effect, what he's saying is, When I'm dead and gone, everything I have will go to the temple.

But in the meantime, guess what? He continues to use that money as he always has. In short, he's not giving that money to the Lord.

He's simply using this vow, this vow of Corban, to make this pious-sounding excuse to really avoid using that money to help his parents.

And Jesus says, This is subtraction by addition. The Pharisees are taking away from God's word by adding to it.

He says, For the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God. And he says, This tradition stems from hypocrisy, not sincerity. So you see, Jesus isn't critiquing them for being too old-fashioned or too strict about God's law.

[12:48] That's not the issue here. He actually accuses them of violating God's law. And by quoting Isaiah, he says what they're doing is mere lip service. It's not a God-honoring act from the heart.

It's empty worship. It's human innovation that goes beyond the scope of God's prescription. So the charge against them is both internal and external.

They are not worshiping God from the heart. Their motivation is wrong. And they are not obeying God in their worship specifically because they've added to what God has commanded.

So they're not worshiping according to God's standard either. Both the motivation and the standard are wrong. Again, as Jesus fulfills the law, there will be aspects of worship that change.

God's standard for worship will take a different shape. But there will continue to be a standard. And what Jesus demonstrates here is that he was just as serious about following that standard as God ever was.

[13:56] And he also shows, and this will become increasingly significant over the course of this study, that we can violate God's standard for worship, not only by removing elements, but also by adding elements.

So if God reveals that we should do this and we don't, that is not acceptable worship. And if he reveals that we should do this and we add to it, we are also disobeying God.

We are essentially saying to him, what you have revealed is insufficient, and I know how to make it better. Now with that, let's turn over to John chapter 4.

John chapter 4. I've referenced what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman in John 4 a few times, so let's consider the context of his statement. As Jesus and his disciples are passing through Samaria,

which was a region between Galilee to the north and Judea to the south, Jesus meets this unnamed Samaritan woman at a well.

He asks her for a drink, and long story short, this leads to the woman thinking that maybe Jesus is a prophet, so she asks him to settle a long-standing dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews.

[15:30] And I'll begin reading at verse 19. The woman said to him, Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.

Jesus said to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know.

We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is here when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth. The woman said to him, I know that Messiah is coming, he who is called Christ.

When he comes, he will tell us all things. Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am he. So the debate here is over the God-ordained proper place of worship.

[16:42] As we know from the Old Testament, God chose Jerusalem as the place where his temple would be built and where his people would worship him. But the Samaritans were a people group that resulted from the Assyrian conquest of Israel.

So over time, and through intermingling between the Jews and the Assyrians, their religion became corrupted. In short, they came to believe that Mount Gerizim was the proper place of worship, not Jerusalem.

And that's what the debate is. Well, in answering this woman's question, the first thing we see is that Jesus points to an upcoming shift regarding the proper place of worship.

He says, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain, that is Gerizim, nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. In other words, a day is soon coming, he says, when the proper place of worship won't be a place at all.

True worship won't be tied to a geographical location. God will be worshipped anywhere and everywhere, wherever you find God's people. By the way, this is why many of the reformers locked their church doors during the week.

[17:57] They wanted to stress that while that building was where they met for corporate worship, you did not need to go to that particular location to pray or to worship or to meet with God.

And this is why the 1689 Baptist Confession says, under the gospel, neither prayer nor any other part of religious worship is now restricted to or made more acceptable by the place where it is done or toward which it is directed.

Instead, God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth, daily in each family and privately by each individual. Also, more formal worship is to be performed in public assemblies and these must not be carelessly or deliberately neglected or forsaken when God, by his word of providence, calls us to them.

Well, the second thing we see in Jesus' response is that worship must be done according to revelation. So even though the place of worship will shift under the new covenant, he does answer this woman's question about old covenant worship.

He says, you worship what you do not know. We worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews. In other words, the Samaritans were wrong.

[19:26] She was wrong. God was to be worshipped in Jerusalem. Why? Because that's what God himself revealed.

And it was wrong for the Samaritans or anyone else to choose their own way or in this case, their own place to worship God. And you'll notice how Jesus ties their departure from right worship to being ignorant of God himself.

You worship what you do not know, he says. So the Samaritans were not only confused about how to worship, they were confused about whom they worshiped.

You see, as I spoke about last time, what God reveals flows from who God is. So if we obscure what he's revealed by adding or subtracting or changing it, we actually obscure the very character

of God.

So let's say as a church, we never corporately confess our sinfulness or we never implore one another to repent from sin.

[20:39] What are we communicating or failing to communicate about God? Well, we're obscuring his righteousness and his holiness.

What if we neglect neglect the Lord's Supper? Well, we're diminishing the centrality of Christ's atoning work. What if we structure our worship around production values and performers on a stage where most of the emphasis is on the audience's emotional response or experience?

Well, this reduces worship to a subjective feeling that can be manufactured rather than God's transcendence and worthiness which is independent of our feelings.

So if we are worshiping God according to his revelation, our standard of worship will flow from his very character and be a reflection of his character, of who he is.

But if we don't worship according to revelation, to what he has given us, we will obscure his character. Really, false worship says more about us than it does about God.

[21:52] And we could extend this a bit further and say how you worship will determine what you become. So if the church, again, minimizes sin, not only do we obscure the holiness of God, but we also will drift toward carnality.

We will become a carnal people who don't treat sin as serious. And frankly, we would be then a people who don't take God seriously. And that can have deadly, eternal consequences.

You know, Danae and I once visited a satellite campus for a huge mega church in Atlanta, Georgia. We were there with some friends and when we walked in, the bass from the music was so loud and deep that you could just feel it in your chest.

And the worship service, throughout, everyone mostly sat back and watched as a few people performed on a stage without really our participation at all.

And during the sermon, the lights were turned so low that I couldn't even see the Bible in my lap. And the preacher, well, the preacher wasn't even there. He was preaching at their main campus.

[23:08] We were just watching him on a big screen. And throughout this experience, I was making mental notes about everything that bothered me. Now, of course, if I had taken those concerns and searched the Scriptures for negatively expressed commandments, such as, thou shalt not play your music too loud, or thou shalt not video cast your preacher, I wouldn't find them.

They wouldn't be there. But it's a bit like Justice Stewart back in the 60s when he was asked to define pornography. And he essentially said, I can't define it, but I know it when I see it.

This is something I've talked about to several people, with several people. In their current church, they may feel that something's a little off, but they can't quite put their finger on it. It just doesn't feel quite right.

So what happens is, a lot of times, they go searching in the Bible for negative commands, but none of them seem to quite apply. So they think to themselves, well, I must be wrong, and the church, what they're doing, must be right.

But what if they searched the Scriptures, not for negative commands, but for positive ones? What if they looked at what the Bible actually reveals about worship?

[24:29] Not to mention God Himself. That might be, they might come to a different conclusion. Frankly, if the Bible contained a list of everything we should not do, it would be a much, much bigger book.

Well, according to Jesus, worship should be done according to what God reveals. He doesn't have to say, don't worship me on Mount Gerizim, because He already said, you shall worship me in Jerusalem.

You see? Now, the third and final thing we see in Jesus' response is that worship remains important, even as we are coming into the New Covenant.

Clearly, some things about worship have changed. But the Lord desires our worship of Him under the New Covenant as much as He did under the Old Covenant.

So Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to

worship Him.

[25:40] That is, God the Father desires people to worship Him. He is pursuing people to worship Him. And perhaps there is even something here about the corporate nature of worship.

Maybe that is implied when Jesus speaks of worshipers in the plural. But, of course, Jesus speaks of a specific kind of worship, an authentic worship in spirit and truth, which we are going to come back to later.

But for now, let us turn over and for the remainder of our time, consider what the Apostle Paul says about worship under the New Covenant. So go with me, if you will, to Colossians chapter 2.

Colossians chapter 2. In Colossians 2, Paul addresses some of the doctrines of false teachers in their day. And when we read this, it's only natural to focus on the errors he's confronting.

But he's also expressing something positive about worship and all of this, and I'll show you that. I'll begin reading at verse 16. Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

[27:02] These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind and not holding fast to the head from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

Now you may be thinking, where's the positive instructions for worship in this? Well, Paul begins by reminding the church that they are no longer under the ceremonial law.

Again, the form and standards for worship have changed under the new covenant. We don't even hold to a seventh day Sabbath anymore. Then, Paul addresses false humility, angel worship, supernatural visions that people claim to have had, and the pride that evidently flows from all of this. So instead of holding fast to the head, Jesus Christ, what they're doing is embracing ideas and practices that are contrary to Christ himself.

That's what Paul means when he says you're doing these things rather than holding fast to Christ. So according to Paul, true worship evidently is not a subjective, entirely internal activity.

[28:41] It is objective. It's external. There is a standard outside of ourselves. You see. There's a right way to worship and there is a wrong way to worship.

And the wrong way to worship stands against Christ himself. It is a departure from Christ who is both the object of our worship as well as the one who shows us how to worship.

So when Paul tells the church don't worship this way, what is he implying? He's implying there is a true way to worship.

And that true way to worship is not something you or I can determine for ourselves. It must come from the Lord. So think about those two principles of worship that I mentioned only briefly last time and we will eventually explore them more fully.

You have the normative principle and the regulative principle. The normative principle says whatever is not expressly forbidden in scripture is permissible in corporate worship.

[29:51] And the regulative principle says only what God has expressly commanded in scripture is permissible in corporate worship.

Now of the two, where do you think Paul lands? Now you might read this list of prohibitions and think that Paul is promoting the normative principle.

But look closer. In verses 16 and 17 he forbids humanly imposed regulations. They are wrong because they are not from God.

And look down at verse 23 he says of these false teachers and their ideas these have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion.

Again he is the reason he is condemning these practices is that they are not from God. Instead they are part of a man-made self-made religion.

[30:57] Then in verse 19 he refers to Christ as the head of the church. In other words he alone has authority over our worship. So the normative principle says whatever is not expressly forbidden in scripture is permissible.

but that is not Paul's understanding. He assumes that unless a practice comes directly from the divine head of the church it is not acceptable.

We can't simply invent a new element of worship and assume it is okay because the Bible doesn't explicitly forbid it. No Paul says no element is permissible unless the Lord himself has revealed it to us.

There is no room in the church for self-made religion. With that let's look at one more passage from Paul. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 14.

1 Corinthians 14. Now there is quite a bit here that teaches us something about worship but I am going to leave it to Pastor Colin to expound the full chapter.

[32:11] God bless him for it. For my purpose I'll draw out only five principles from what God says. As we heard from Pastor Colin last Sunday evening Paul is addressing the proper use of these spiritual gifts at least particular gifts such as the gifts of tongues and prophecy.

And to be clear this is within the context of corporate worship. And I point this out because there are those who would go as far as to say that the New Testament never teaches the practice of corporate worship.

Which probably sounds strange to most Christians but they think of corporate worship as an Old Testament concept. In the New Testament they say the church does gather but not for formal worship.

Well as we see here in 1 Corinthians 14 the church is gathering for corporate worship and Paul is very clear that this gathering should have structure and order to it.

In verse 26 Paul says when you come together each one has a hymn a lesson a revelation a tongue or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

[33:33] So first of all we see that God does in fact regulate worship under the new covenant. This is not a free for all. Paul does not permit us to do anything we want so long as God doesn't forbid it.

Now he says here if the thing you're doing doesn't build up the church there's one standard. If it doesn't build up the church it doesn't belong. Second you'll see that Paul places limits on certain aspects of participation.

So verse 27 if any speak in a tongue let there be only two or at most three and each in turn and let someone interpret.

And then he applies a similar limitation to those with the gift of prophecy in verse 29 again it's two or three at most and always one at a time and if there's no one to interpret verse 28 those with the gift of tongues shouldn't speak at all.

Third you'll notice that once again what Paul reveals about how we should worship flows from the very character of God.

[34:42] Verse 33 for God is not a God of confusion but of peace. In other words our worship should be structured and well ordered because God himself is a God of structure and order.

So worship is not only regulated by what God explicitly reveals about how we should worship but it also should always be consistent with his nature and what he reveals will be consistent with his nature.

Fourth Paul stresses that worship is to be governed by the clear commands of God. Verse 37 if anyone thinks that he is a prophet or spiritual he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.

Now this is interesting because some would argue that structure and order and insisting on all of these do's and don'ts in worship is basically quenching the spirit. Right?

But that's not the case because we're talking about God's spirit and we've just learned that God is a God of peace and order. So even God given spirit given gifts are subject to the Lord's commands.

[36:05] And fifth Paul says in verse 40 all things should be done decently and in order. In other words our worship should always be in subjection to the head of the church Jesus Christ because only he has the authority to determine what is true and proper worship.

Ligon Duncan writes the Bible does more than show us that there is such a thing as corporate worship and that God cares about how it is done.

The Bible testifies in both New Testament and Old in its teachings about God and his enduring moral norms by precept and example that corporate worship is to be conducted in careful response to divine revelation.

Or as Sam Waldron puts it the church is holy and thus its formal assemblies are holy and for this reason governed by God in a special and distinctive way.

Scripture alone in its special application to the church governs the church's worship in a way and with a specificity that it does not govern the rest of human life.

[37:18] When this special function of scripture as the regulative principle of the church is properly appreciated then it guides us to a biblical pattern of worship to which nothing substantial should be added and from which nothing should be subtracted because the pattern is divinely established.

So God has always cared about how he is worshipped. we see that in the Old Testament with Nadab and Abihu, we see it with King Saul, they were judged for either adding to or subtracting from God's commands regarding worship.

We see from Cain and Abel that God's concern for worship actually predates the ceremonial law and we see from Christ and Paul in particular that it continues after the ceremonial law.

And not only does he care about worship but he also defines whether or not our worship is acceptable. Jesus shows us that man-made traditions have no place in worship when they go beyond the scope of divine revelation.

Paul too rejects self-made religion and argues that the Lord alone regulates our corporate worship. He is the head of the church. So even those claiming to have spiritual gifts which they may must submit to the Lord's authority over worship.

[38:51] So if nothing else we should see from Scripture that we want to be very careful about how we worship. Frankly we should be suspicious of new ideas, new practices being introduced in the church and we should be willing to examine any element of worship under the light of Scripture.

does God reveal this? But we'll continue this study next time. For now let's pray. Father we thank you for revealing yourself to us and for showing us how you are to be worshiped.

We ask that you would guard us from the pride of self-made religion and teach us instead to worship you in sincerity and truth. Help us to hold fast to Christ, the head of the church and to order all that we do according to his will.

And may our worship honor you and reflect your glory even this morning. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen. Thank you.