

True Worth-ship

John 4:16-26

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²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

²³ But 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.

²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

²⁵ 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."

²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

Worship on the Mountain

In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel went to foot of [Mt. Eden](#) and offered sacrifices to God; they went to the gate guarded by the cherubim and worshipped. In Genesis 9, Noah offered sacrifices to God on [Mt. Ararat](#); after the ark landed, Noah got off and worshiped God on the mountain. In Exodus 3, Moses walked a little way up [Mt. Sinai](#) and saw a strange sight. He saw a burning bush. Inside the Bush was the Angel of the LORD. **When Moses asked him his name**, he said, "I AM." Then Moses took off his sandals and worshiped God on the mountain.

In Genesis 12, after Abram was called by God and taken into the Promised Land, in the very place where Jesus now stood talking to the woman and the well, on [Mt. Gerizim](#), Abram built an altar and worshiped the LORD. Years later, in Genesis 33, Jacob did the same thing. Centuries later still, at the command of God, half of Israel was to climb to the top of Mt. Gerizim and the other half to Mt. Ebal right next to it, and have a huge worship service.

Later on in Abraham's life, he would be called go to [Mt. Moriah](#), which later became [Mt. Zion](#). He offered up his only begotten son Isaac on the mountain as a sacrifice of worship. But the LORD stopped him, provided an animal, and Abraham worshiped through an animal sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. Abraham's sacrifice on this mountain becomes a foreshadow-

ing of something later on in the OT. Several places in Deuteronomy say that a time is coming when God will choose to make his name dwell in a certain place. It is there that Israel will go up and worship the LORD. Sure enough, in the days of David, God says build me a temple on Mt. Zion. So Israel continually offered worship to God on Mt. Zion until the days of Jesus.

“Worship” comes from an old Saxon word (*weorðscipe*) meaning, “**condition of being worthy.**” To worship is to turn towards the highest thing, giving it reverence and honor above all else. Worship is the most important thing Christians do, as long as it is the worship of God. Worship is more important than evangelism. It is more important than theologizing. It is more important than raising godly children. It is more important than hard work. This is because worship sets the stage for all these other things. If you don’t worship God first, all the rest becomes idolatry. Worship is an act of humbly acknowledging that the Father, through Christ and the Spirit are alone worthy of praise and thanksgiving for anything that happens in this world. Without this as the starting point, everything else becomes legalistic duty or self-centered pride. Worship on the mountain symbolizes that God is higher than we, so it was an appropriate place to worship.¹

¹ Saying nothing, of course, of the cosmic mountain implications as the “seat” of God’s rule.

But is there a right way to worship? Is there a wrong way? Today's pluralistic society will tell you there is no wrong way to worship even as there is no right God to worship. This is what we want to look at today.

Coming to Grips with Our Sin

We come to [John 4:16-26](#). It continues the story of Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well. They are sitting together at the foot of Jacob's well, in Shechem, under the shadow of [Mt. Gerizim](#). Jesus has finished talking about living water. The woman is confused, thinking that Jesus is still talking about physical water, but maybe he has a secret source, like a hidden well or underground spring, or something. But Jesus was not talking about physical water. He was talking about spiritual water, the only remedy you can drink that will give you eternal life.

She does not realize that [he is the living water](#), though she should have, because even in the first five books of the Bible, several passages point out that in the last days, Messiah will bring living water that will give new life to the people ([see previous sermon John 4:1-15](#)). Perhaps she does not realize this because [she does not yet see her need](#) for this living water, her need for eternal life. Thus, instead of pursuing the question about living water further with her, he changes the subject. Jesus is the master of getting to the root of a matter.

The change of subject occurs in **John 4:16-19**. He will now point out two things to her. 1. He will show her **her need for living water**, by showing her **her sin**. 2. He will show her **the source of this living water, Christ himself**, by showing her that he knows all things, for she is talking to no mere man. Rather, she is talking to the God-man, the Word made flesh, the one who has supernatural knowledge of people's sin (see also **John 1:50**), the one who seeks and saves lost sinners. This is what you will be confronted with as we go through these four verses together. This man Jesus is an extraordinary fellow. His bold claims to be the Messiah are founded upon certain authority.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here’” (**John 4:16**). As we will soon see, Jesus is not telling her to get her husband so that, together, they can walk with him to the secret spring somewhere near Jacob's well. The Lord has a different talking about a husband.

The woman responds, “I have no husband” (**John 4:17**). This is a touchy subject for the woman, not because she is a virgin never married, but for a different, very shameful reason. The woman's answer is technically correct, but as several commentators have noticed, it seems to be her way of warding off any further probing of this sensitive area of her life, while masking the guilt and hurt (cf., Carson, “John,” *PNTC*, 221). I have found this is exactly what people do when you start talking about sin, particularly their sin. They deflect the issue.

But bringing the sin into the light is the only true way of healing guilt and hurt.

Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true” (John 4:16b-17). Jesus is gentle, but firm, in his answer. He commends her for her truthfulness; he does not attack her for hiding behind her answer. Yet, he exposes the real truth, and in the process, lays bare his omniscience. Jesus knows this woman ... as he knows you. There is no sin in your life that he is not aware that you have.

Jesus knows that the woman did not understand what living water was, because the woman saw no need for living water. People feel no need for living water, because they are not spiritually thirsty. People do not thirst spiritually, because they don't feel themselves to be sinful, or if they do, they think they can hide it. So, Jesus' change of subject confronts her with her sin.

What is her sin? The sin is that she is “living in sin” as they say. She is living with a man, sleeping with him, but he is not her husband. She is not married. Our culture has completely abandoned every conception that what she is doing is sinful. Movies openly, proudly revel in it. Headlines mock those who still hold to it. Governments have stricken the books of laws against it. But for thousands of years in almost every culture on the planet, this was deemed sinful, because

people retained the basic knowledge of marriage and covenant from the Garden of Eden. Of course, the Bible deems this sinful from Genesis to Revelation.

Now, the woman told Jesus that she was not married, and he admitted to her that she was correct. But she couldn't hide the reason from Jesus. She had either been widowed or divorced five times! This is perhaps why not even other women would come with her to the well. Rabbinic opinion did not approve of more than three marriages, even if they were legal, and this woman is on her sixth man, living in common law marriage, which no one approved of. She is, to paraphrase Nathaniel Hawthorne, the embodiment of the Scarlet Letter.

The Scripture does not tell us if she has been divorced or widowed, but it doesn't really matter, since the sin in view is her present situation of living with a man out of wedlock. Besides, John is much more interested in telling us about **Jesus' supernatural knowledge**. Think about it. Jesus knows the most painful, sinful thing about a woman he has never even met. We don't even know her name, but Jesus knows everything about her. The same goes for you. Pick from the many sins in your life, the one you are most ashamed of. Jesus knows it, even if no one else does. For this reason alone, he is to be worshiped, and you ought to humble yourself in the presence of a God like this.

This causes the woman to step back and reevaluate who she is talking to. **“Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (John**

4:19). Like **Nathan** who had supernatural insight into David's secret sin with Bathsheba and her husband, his friend, Uriah, Jesus knows what is not ordinarily possible to know. Her acknowledgement that he is a prophet is interesting, if **Leon Morris** is right when he says, "The Samaritans acknowledged no prophet after Moses other than the one spoken of in **Deuteronomy 18:18**, and him they regarded as the Messiah. For her to speak of Jesus as a prophet was thus to move into the area of messianic speculation."² The woman clearly does not yet think Jesus is the Messiah (in **vs. 25** she acknowledges her belief that Messiah is coming), but this statement that he is a prophet opens the door.

Talking Theology to Avoid the Real Issue

At this moment, I believe that his knowledge of her scares her. So now *she changes the subject*. I'm not dogmatic about this. Some, like Calvin, think she is simply interested in knowing the question she now asks, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship" (**John 4:20**). Calvin seems to think that since she has this prophet here, she might as well take advantage of it by having a theological conversation. But it seems to make more sense to me, given what I know of **human depravity**, that her change of subject is a way **to avoid her sin**.

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 236.

As **D. A. Carson** says (though he ends up siding with Calvin on this), “It is always easier to talk theology than to deal with truth that is personally distressing.”³

Albert Barnes writes, “Nothing is more common than for sinners to *change* the conversation when it begins to bear too hard upon their consciences; and no way of doing it is more common than to direct it to some *speculative* inquiry having *some sort of connection with religion*, as if to show that they are willing to talk *about* religion, and do not wish to appear to be opposed to it. Sinners do not love direct religious conversation, but many are too well-bred to refuse altogether to talk about it; yet they choose to converse about some speculative matter, or something pertaining to the mere *externals* of religion, rather than the salvation of their own souls.”⁴ There can be a great danger here, if you love to talk about theology in order to avoid the true problem of your own sin. Like some Calvinists I’ve met who love to talk about total depravity, until the subject turns to *their own* depravity. Beware of hiding your heart under the ruse of theological investigation. Jesus knows your heart. You cannot fool him.

The woman’s question brings up one of the great disagreements between Jews and Samaritans: **The correct place of**

³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 221.

⁴ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Luke & John*, ed. Robert Frew (London: Blackie & Son, 1884-1885), 217.

worship. Since the days of Jeroboam and the divided kingdom, Israelites in the north could not go down to Jerusalem to worship, because it was a different country! Jeroboam ended up creating his own worship shrines in Dan and Bethel, his own priesthood, his own special holy days, and other things in order to accommodate the people in the impossible situation they found themselves in (1 Kgs 12:27-33; though, he could have made a truce with Rehoboam, submitted to his kingship, and brought unity to the nations if he wanted to).

But the schism goes back longer than that. Samaritan theology placed the schism at the time of Eli, the priest when Samuel was a baby. Eli moved the sanctuary from Shechem (Josh 24:25?) to Shiloh (1 Sam 1:3; but see Josh 18:1 for an earlier date of the ark at Shiloh), they believe, establishing both an illegitimate priesthood and place of worship. This began the era of divine disfavor,⁵ which would exist until the Messiah would come to return worship to its proper place.

Some fifty or so years into the divided kingdom, Samaria was established by King Omri, the sixth king of Israel (in the north). Sometime later, a temple was established on top of Mt. Gerizim to rival the one in Jerusalem (according to tradition, it was built in the fifth century and was destroyed by John Hyrcanus and the Jews in 120 BC; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.254-56).

⁵ Robert T. Anderson, "Samaritans" In , in , vol. 5, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 941.

Israel believed it had justification for this, because Gerizim, as I've shown, was the place of Abram's original altar when he first came into the land. It was the place God commanded Israel to worship in the covenant ceremony (**Deut 11:29**). But it was not the place God had chosen to put his name. That place was Mt. Zion in Jerusalem.

True Worship Means Coming to Christ

At any rate, Jesus plays along with her, whether it is a charade on her part to avoid the issue of her sin, or she is genuinely interested and wants to take advantage of a the knowledge of a prophet in her midst. I'm going to skip a verse. Jesus says, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (**John 4:22**). This would have been a hard word for her to hear, but it was the truth. What is he getting at? I think there are two aspects to his answer.

First, because the Samaritans reject everything but the first five books of the Bible, they do not acknowledge that God had chosen Jerusalem and Mt. Zion as the place where he would set his name. Therefore, **they worship in ignorance**. Jews, on the other hand, had the Scripture, had this knowledge, and worshiped, correctly, in Jerusalem.

Second, and more importantly, the **Jews know the object of their worship**. Many may not have accepted/believed it, but they know it, because they have the revelation revealed in the

Scripture. The object of their worship is “the Name” in passages that refer to place of worship. Listen to these examples, “If the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the LORD your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the LORD your God chooses, to set his Name there” (Deut 14:24).⁶ “Solomon purposed to build a temple for the Name of the LORD” (2 Chr 2:1). “In Judah God is known; his Name is great in Israel” (Ps 76:1). Because they have the Scriptures, the revelation, the oracles, the covenants (see Rom 9:1-5), salvation comes from the Jews, not the Samaritans. There are all sorts of implications of this, but Jesus does not press the point, because he is not interested in theological dialogue. He came here for this woman.

So, in my opinion, Jesus’ answer changes the subject, again, ever so slightly. Go back to vs. 21, “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father’” (John 4:21). What Jesus is doing?

Think about the woman’s question. She wants to know *the proper place* of worship. “Where” should we worship? This is imperative to keep in mind. She wanted a debate on this mountain (Mt. Gerizim) vs. that mountain (Mt. Zion); Jews vs. Samaritans. Jesus tells her that the Jews are correct,

⁶ We applied this verse to Jesus’ travels to Jerusalem in John 2.

but then forces the issue back to a more personal level. He won't enter into a debate with her. Instead, he returns to Messianic ideas (brought up with the whole "living water" conversation), which she partly opened up in her acknowledgement that he is a prophet. Jesus turns the question back onto himself. But a lot of people miss this.

You have to think back to [John 2:19-21](#). This gives an insight to you, the reader, that the woman was not privy to. "Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking about the temple of his body." We, the readers, know that Jesus is the true place of worship. He is the place where God has now set his "Name." Jesus is going to tell her this in a different way.

When he refers to "the hour is coming," he is bringing up Messianic language, eschatological language, language of the last days. In using the word "hour," he is saying it is very close ("time" is not a good translation). The place of worship will no longer be Gerizim or Zion. It will change. It will be soon.

Now we read [vs. 23](#) in light of [vs. 21](#). "But the hour is coming, *and is now 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 in spirit and truth" ([John 4:23-24](#)). The hour is now here. The time of the change of the place of

worship is now here. The Messianic expectations, so long anticipated, have arrived. This woman is privileged to a most remarkable sight. She gets to witness, first hand, the change of the place of worship.

Keep in mind that both the woman and Jesus have been talking about the “place” of worship. When Jesus says that true worshipers will worship the Father “in spirit and truth,” he is not merely talking about *the way* of worship, as if worship must be done with the heart and according to biblical revelation. “Spirit” and “truth” refer to *the “place”* of worship. This is something we need to explore. This is how we worship “truly.”

First, it is, of course, true that **NT worship needs to be done sincerely and in truth**. Many have taken “spirit” to mean the human spirit. The idea is that God now wants people who will worship him *from the heart*, not just with the body. But they never bother to ask the question, **isn't it true that God always wanted this?** Is Jesus somehow saying that suddenly, now, because the time is here, that God wants people, for the first time, to worship him with the heart? That's ridiculous, yet many people never see it. There are a thousand verses in the OT that say God has always wanted people to worship him from the heart. “**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart**” (Deut 6:5). “**The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart**” (Psa 51:17). There could be nothing more anti-biblical than to think that before Christ came, God didn't care about a person's heart in worship.

What about truth? God, of course, wants worship that is done *in truth*. Many have taken “truth” to mean something like “according to divine commandments.” But again the question, *hasn't God always wanted people to worship him the right way*, as he has revealed? (Sadly, in our day, one often gets the impression that God never cared, and still doesn't, about worshiping God the right way, for “right way” seems so intolerant). Didn't God tell Cain, “*If you do well, will you not be accepted*” (*Gen 4:7*)? Didn't Samuel tell Saul, “*Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD*” (*1Sa 15:22*). Everywhere you look in the OT, worship is to be done according to what God has revealed, and nothing whatsoever has changed in the NT. Worship has never been all heart or only obedience, but the correct balance of both. And it is sacrilegious that anyone would say otherwise.

But *Jesus is saying there is something new going on here*. The hour has come when true worshipers will worship in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. If it is a new thing, then it must be something different than what we have just seen. Notice, first, that “*God is seeking them*.” And when God seeks, God finds. No one, not even a woman living in sin and married to five other men, can hide from God. If he wants her, he will find her. He will lay bare her soul. He will cut out the rotten core, and give her a heart of flesh. He loves her with a special, saving, forgiving love.

Jesus is not here to condemn this woman ([John 3:17](#)), but to speak life-giving words of gospel so that she might go away changed, able to worship truly and properly, because she has been confronted with the truth and spirit.

What is the truth Jesus has in mind? What is the spirit? I think there is probably a double entendre going on here. It does refer to the heart and the law. It does refer to sincerity and obedience. But it refers to more. It refers to [the new place of worship](#), the new temple, the new mountain, wherein these things find their only acceptable expression.

It refers to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, especially his coming at Pentecost. Later in this gospel Jesus will say, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” ([John 14:6](#)). Earlier in this Gospel it said, “The Word became flesh ... full of grace and truth” ([John 1:14](#)). Jesus is the Truth. In [John 15:26](#), the Holy Spirit is called “The Spirit of Truth.” Before Jesus came to earth, the people of the Qumran community by the Dead Sea wrote, “The time appointed for the judgment decided. Then God will refine, with his truth, all man’s deeds ... and cleansing him with the spirit of holiness from ever wicked deed” ([1 QS 4.20-21](#)). The expectations were about Messiah and the coming Holy Spirit.

To further back this up, Jesus says that “God is spirit.” In the catechism we ask, “What is God.” The answer is, “God is spirit, and has no body like man.” Spirit and truth concern the reality of God. For believers, that reality is found in Jesus,

when they come to experience him through the Holy Spirit who allows them to know the truth.⁷ Jesus is the place of worship, the mountain, as Daniel calls him. “But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (Dan 2:35). This is what he is telling the woman. You must come to him. He is the place of worship.

If you want to worship God truly, then you must worship God through Christ by the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to be sincere in your worship, especially if it is apart from obedient worship the way God has commanded in his word. It is also not enough to be obedient in your worship, especially if you are just going through the motions, with an external religion and a heart far from caring about what you are doing. It is not even enough to have both, if you somehow think you can have both by worshiping apart from Christ and the Spirit. In fact, if you think this, you are mistaken. For if you try to worship God apart from the second and third persons of the Godhead, your worship is neither really sincere, nor truthful.

Therefore, to worship God, you must be in the right place of worship. You must be in Christ. You must be saved by the Holy Spirit. God will not accept your worship if you are not. You must respond to the Gospel, repent of your sins, see in Christ his deity and humanity, trust him alone to save you, and

⁷ Ernst Haenchen, Robert Walter Funk and Ulrich Busse, *John : A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 223.

be baptized to demonstrate that your faith is genuine in this first act of obedience as a Christian. Then you can worship truly.

Many people would stop here, but we have two more important verses. In **vs. 25** the woman says in response, “**I know that Messiah is coming** (he who is called Christ). The Samaritans believed in a coming Messiah. They called him **Taheb** (“He who returns” or “he who restores”). “**When he comes, he will tell us all things.**” She seems to be referring to the Samaritan expectation that Messiah would restore the place of true worship to Shechem and Mt. Gerizim. “**He will bring the extinct tabernacle with all its paraphernalia to light and restore the cult to its original purity.**”⁸ She rightly takes notice of this because Jesus has just been telling her about a change in the place of worship.

How then does Jesus respond? **Just as he responded to Moses** on that day he saw the burning bush on the side of the mountain, so he now responds to this woman. Except this time, he did it in the flesh, as a human being just like her. “**Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he,’**” or more literally, “**I am, the one speaking to you.**” “**I am**” (see **Ex 3:6**, 14 LXX). Jesus says that he is the Messiah and that he is God. He has come to bring her living water. He knows all things, even her deepest secrets and grossest sins. He has also come to

⁸ Cited in Ibid.

bring forgiveness and salvation, and the true place of worship. All of this was something she had been expecting, but never dreamed she would be personally a part of seeing fulfilled. The redeemer, the restorer, the Messiah, God in the flesh, had come to her and has told her the way to have eternal life. The whole thing is utterly remarkable.

We learn in a few verses that [the woman went out and began to tell everyone](#) that the Messiah had come to her ([John 4:28-29](#)). They came to him and saw the things he did. He stayed there a couple days and many Samaritans believed in him ([vs. 39](#)). Samaritans believing in the Messiah. Outcasts, half-breeds, cast-aways, sinners, despicable people one and all to the Jews. Jesus came to them, revealed himself, proved himself, and they believed.

He is doing the same now, here in this place of worship, as God's people have been lifted up to heaven in this covenant renewal ceremony. He speaks now through his word. His word is sharp and it cuts. He knows your sins. His word is gentle and kind, for he came to forgive them one and all. Come to Christ and be forgiven.

For indeed, he is the place of worship, the temple and the mountain, the truth of God who sends the Spirit of God. Any who come to him may worship God truly. God is seeking those who will worship him in Christ. He will find them. Therefore, respond to him today by faith in worship of the

Messiah who has come to save us from our sins. He alone is worthy.