



Healthy Church

Week 8: Worship, Giving, Prayer

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

Healthy churches worship God, give generously, and pray faithfully, among other things. When we gather weekly as the church, we bring our individual experiences with God into a collective experience.

Corporate worship was never intended to be the full extent of our spiritual lives, but rather a meeting of God's people to worship Him, celebrate His faithfulness, and commune with Him together as the people of God.

Donald Whitney, in his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, wrote, "Can we expect the flames of our worship of God to burn brightly in public on the Lord's Day when they barely flicker for Him in secret on other days?"

Our public worship reflects our private devotion. Our challenge this week, and always, is to stoke the flame of our faith throughout the week as we prepare our hearts to meet with God and His people each Sunday.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

John 4:21-24: Matthew 6:1-15

THE MAIN IDEA

A healthy church worships God, gives generously, and prays faithfully.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How do our private disciplines of worship, giving, and prayer impact the health of the church as a whole?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 4:21-24 A healthy church worships in Spirit and truth. When Jesus encountered the woman at the well, He invited her into a relationship with God that transcended culture, ethnicity, and location. Our private worship impacts our corporate worship experience. As God's people prioritize worship, God is glorified, and the church makes Christ the center of our faith and practice.

Matthew 6:1-4 A healthy church gives generously. God's people should give thoughtfully, privately, and generously. When we share what we have with others and with the church, without seeking special status or recognition, God is honored, and He rewards people's faithfulness.

Matthew 6:5-15 A healthy church prays faithfully. Our prayer life should be a humble and personal experience. Jesus taught us to pray, acknowledging who God is and what He has done, expressing our thanksgiving, confessing our sin, asking for our needs, and trusting in His protection. Whether individually or corporately, our prayers should not focus on ourselves and the power of our own words but on God.



START HERE

How do we know what to do when we gather in worship? Is God concerned with the types of seats we sit in, the style of music we sing, or the way we structure our small group time? In today's lesson we'll look at three things that reflect a healthy church: worship, giving, and prayer. Surprisingly, these characteristics of a healthy church are first reflected in the individual disciplines of maturing believers. As we spend individual time with God in worship, giving, and prayer, He prepares us for healthy gathering as a body.

DISCUSS

How much would you say private spiritual practices impact the church as a whole? Explain.

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Healthy churches worship in Spirit and truth.

John 4:21-24: *Jesus told her, "Believe me, woman, an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know, because salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. Yes, the Father wants such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth."*

Unpacking John 4:21-24

From the 1970s through the early 2000s, a culture shift happened in churches across America. As a generation of "Rock and Rollers" found Jesus, they wanted to adopt some of their modern musical styles for worship. Suddenly, churches that had worshiped through hymns throughout history debated what constituted worship. Could modern lyrics, guitars, and drums be worship? Could a church worship without a choir? What kind of worship does God like best? While worship debates are not as prominent today, believers still examine what makes worship "real" and how God is glorified in it. Today's text gives insight into how Jesus views worship and what role it should play in our lives and churches today.

In John 4, Jesus and the disciples left Judea and headed back toward Galilee. In preparation for today's lesson, read the entire story in John 4:1-45. Verse 4 says, "He [Jesus] **had** to travel through Samaria." The shortest route between Judea and Galilee was a straight line through Samaria; it was not the only route. In New Testament times, travelers had two other options. They could go west and intersect with the King's highway toward the Mediterranean Sea or go East along the Jordan River toward the Sea of Galilee. Both routes were longer but allowed Jews to "skip" Samaria and the Samaritans who lived there. The Samaritans were distant spiritual cousins of the Jews but considered outside of the family of faith. Any self-respecting Jew would have chosen the longer route. But Jesus went through Samaria.



On this journey, Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman near Jacob's well. She was far from a spiritual insider—a Samaritan, a woman, divorced, and living in adultery. It is little surprise she came to the well at noon, the hottest part of the day, probably to avoid the gossiping women from town. Shockingly, Jesus engaged this woman and invited her into the family of God (John 4:13-14). In this first invitation to a non-Jew, Jesus demonstrated that the kingdom of God extends to all who come to Him by faith.

Experiencing Christ in worship is a vulnerable experience. As Hebrews 4:13 says, "No creature is hidden from him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account." At times, God's people might split theological hairs or get caught up in secondary debates about worship styles or clothing to avoid the discomfort of our souls laid bare before God. When the woman at the well tried to turn Christ's attention away from her sin (vv. 19-20), He gently redirected her attention.

Jesus revealed three important truths about worship in this conversation. First, He said worship is not contained in a place. In the Old Testament, worship happened in the tabernacle and later in the temple. Ethnicity and physical proximity presented real barriers for people to encounter God. The Jewish people traveled to Jerusalem three times a year for worship (Passover, First fruits, and Tabernacles; Leviticus 23:4-44; Deuteronomy 16:1-17). In Samaria, Jesus told the woman that worship in the kingdom would extend beyond the borders of Israel and outside of the walls of the temple.

Second, in verse 22, Jesus reminded the woman that salvation is from the Jews. Through God's providence and plan, He chose Abraham's descendants to become a great nation. (Genesis 12:1-3). Jesus pointed out that salvation came *from* the Jews, but notice He did not say it was solely *for* the Jews. The new covenant Jesus ushered in fulfilled God's heart for the nations expressed in Genesis 12:3, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Jesus's invitation to the Samaritan woman inaugurated a future reality where worship will pour out to God from every nation on earth (Revelation 7:9-10).

Finally, Jesus revealed that all who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth. Just as Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John 3:5, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

True worship happens when our spirit communes with the Spirit of God, truthfully, honestly, and sincerely. As Robert E. Webber said in his book, *Ancient-Future Worship*, "We are spiritual not because we practice the disciplines or use pious words but because we are united to Jesus who has restored our union with God."¹ When we recognize the goodness of God and our unity with Christ through the Spirit, the natural response is worship.

A healthy church worships God in Spirit and in truth. We cannot worship God publicly until we surrender to God personally. Until Christ is Lord of our hearts, we will, like the Samaritans, "worship what [we] do not know" (John 4:22). However, when we come to Christ by faith, we will, like the Samaritan woman and many others in her town worship and proclaim, "We no



longer believe because of what you said, since we have heard for ourselves and know that this really is the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

DISCUSS

- What faulty ideas did the Samaritan woman bring to her understanding of worship?
- How might we be tempted to focus on the wrong things in worship?
- What does it look like to worship “in Spirit and in truth”? What might need to shift in your approach to worship?

2. Healthy churches give generously.

Matthew 6:1-4: *“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father in heaven. So whenever you give to the poor, don’t sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be applauded by people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward. But when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

Unpacking Matthew 6:1-4

Preschoolers are not shy about seeking praise for doing an assigned household chore. “I did it!” they exclaim loudly, demonstrating the “not-quite-right” technique for making the bed or sweeping the floor. Sometimes we adults might be tempted to behave the same way. While we naturally want recognition for the good things we do, some things, like giving, are best done privately. When the focus is on God, the Giver of our resources, He gets the glory when material needs are met.

Jesus’s teaching on giving is part of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5, He outlined what righteous living looks like in God’s Kingdom. There was a temptation in New Testament times, and today, to use generosity as a form of virtue signaling. That kind of behavior is far from what God intended. In Matthew 6:1-4, Jesus explained that our righteous acts are to be done secretly, to serve others, and for God to get the glory.

In these short verses, there are a few important distinctions to note about how God views generous living. First, Christ set the expectation that God’s people are generous people. There is an assumption that the people of God are practicing righteousness. God is righteous, and one marker of His people is their pursuit of righteousness, which honors God. “The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous” (1 John 3:7). Generosity and service should be the hallmarks of God’s people, especially toward the body of Christ (Galatians 6:10).



This passage also teaches that our generosity toward others should be done without seeking attention. When God's people give, their focus should not be on shaming the recipient of the gift or extolling the virtue of the giver. Rather, giving should be done humbly and discreetly.

We are to be generous people because we serve a generous God. Because of sin, we all enter this world in spiritual poverty. We cannot rescue ourselves. Yet God, in His compassion, sent His Son, Jesus, to exchange His riches in heaven for our salvation (2 Corinthians 8:9). Christians, regardless of their material possessions, have immeasurable riches in Christ. Many of us can attest to the supernatural ways God has provided for our physical needs. As God meets our needs, we can bless and help others as an expression of our gratitude and trust in God to provide. There is no need to draw attention to ourselves when we give, because everything we have comes from God (James 1:17). In fact, Jesus says that those who give publicly have "received their reward in full" (Matthew 6:2).

Finally, this passage teaches us that God will reward generosity. In one very real sense, there are eternal rewards for those who pursue righteousness in this life (Matthew 16:27; James 1:12). In another sense, the Bible indicates that generosity and righteousness will be rewarded by God in this life, although not necessarily in the way we might expect (Proverbs 11:18; 13:21). Whether God rewards our generosity and acts of righteousness in this life or in the life to come, we can be confident that God sees the generosity and righteousness of His people, even under a veil of humility and secrecy, and will reward us in due time.

Generosity toward God and others is a hallmark of a healthy church. As Francis Chan said, "Non-churchgoers tend to see the church as takers rather than givers. When Christians sacrifice and give wildly to the poor, that is truly a light that glimmers. The Bible teaches that the church is to be that light, that sign of hope, in an increasingly dark and hopeless world."² Our giving should not be a public display but a private matter between a person and God. When we trust God with our time, our talent, and our treasure, we demonstrate our trust in Him, we partner with Him to meet the needs of others, and we get to be a part of seeing how He supernaturally provides for His people.

DISCUSS

- *Why do you think Jesus placed such importance on giving privately?*
- *Why are we sometimes afraid to say God rewards people for their generosity? How has this idea been twisted?*
- *Can you think of a time that God has challenged you to give more generously? How did it grow your faith? If you can't think of a time, how does that inform your present commitment to generous living?*



3. Healthy churches pray faithfully.

Matthew 6:5-15: *“Whenever you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, because they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you pray, don’t babble like the Gentiles, since they imagine they’ll be heard for their many words. Don’t be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask him.*

Therefore, you should pray like this:

*Our Father in heaven,
your name be honored as holy.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.*

For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. 15 But if you don’t forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses.”

Unpacking Matthew 6:5-15

In 2024, the NCAA allowed college football teams to have direct communication between the coach and two players (one offense, one defense) on the field. Now, rather than struggling to read and interpret signs and symbols, the coach can talk directly into the helmet of the quarterback or a defensive player. This communication system, which the NFL has used for decades, has the potential to bring about major changes to college football. The caveat? It is one-way communication, meaning the coach can communicate with his two top players, but the players cannot talk back.

We might think of the Bible as a football communication headset. In it, God speaks His living and active Word into our hearts. The Bible calls the plays of life, so to speak, that we can know God, love God, and learn how to follow Him. Prayer is more like a quarterback’s meeting with his coach. The player tells the coach what is happening on the field, asks for what he needs from his coach, and communicates the needs of the other players. In response, it is the player’s responsibility to listen to the coach, accept his instructions, and carry out his desires on the field.

As Jesus transitioned from His teaching on generosity to prayer, you will notice a similar theme of discretion. The Jewish leaders practiced three forms of public piety—almsgiving (Matthew 6:1-4), prayer (Matthew 6:5-15), and fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). Jesus was not condemning any of these practices. In these verses He said, “When you give,” “when you pray,” and “when you



fast.” Jesus’s condemnation was not of acts of piety, but of the attitude of the heart. The religious leaders of the day made a great show of their actions, desiring to be seen and extolled in front of the people. Their hearts were more interested in impressing men than worshipping God, and for that, Jesus called them “hypocrites” who had received their reward already.

Another example Jesus gave of inappropriateness in prayer deals with the way “the Gentiles” prayed. These non-Jewish people prayed to their gods using ritualistic incantations and repetitive phrases, believing that their babbling words and rote memorization would impress their gods. Jesus dismissed their tradition outright (Matthew 6:8). The difference between the pagan Gentiles and people who belong to the kingdom of God is relationship. The Gentiles had to try to incite their god’s attention through ritualistic prayers and sacrifice (1 Kings 18). Jesus, however, says that God already knows our needs before we ask. We come to Him, not begging for His attention, but we enter His presence boldly as beloved children (Hebrews 4:16). And as His children, we can trust that He will not only hear, but He will meet our needs (Matthew 7:9-11).

After teaching the correct posture for prayer—humility and sincerity—Jesus gave a pattern for prayer. While it is appropriate to repeat this prayer word-for-word, the Lord’s Prayer offers us more than something to memorize—it gives us a model for how we should seek God through prayer: “Our Father in heaven, your name be honored as holy. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (vv. 9-10).

In prayer we worship God for who He is, and we acknowledge His rule and reign on earth, in heaven, and in our hearts. We recognize, among His other attributes, His holiness and sovereign control overall, and we declare our desire to see His rule and reign in the world and in our lives.

“Give us today our daily bread” (v. 11). In prayer, we ask for what we need, trusting that He will supply our needs, as He fed the Israelites bread from heaven. We recognize that we need God’s ongoing providence, and it reminds us to seek Him daily.

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (v. 12). Confession is a principal component of prayer. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Part of the healing relationship of prayer is acknowledging our sin before God and confessing our need for forgiveness. Confession keeps us humble before God and humble before others. It is interesting to note that Jesus’s model teaches us to pray for God’s forgiveness first and also to commit to forgive others (Matthew 6:12). Forgiveness is the hallmark of a people who have been forgiven by a loving Father.

Finally, Jesus ends the prayer saying, “And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (v. 13). We recognize that this world is broken by sin, and we need God’s help to avoid it. When we ask God to help us avoid temptation, we recognize our sinful nature and need for His help. We are taught to flee from sin and run toward God (2 Timothy 2:22). Furthermore,



Jesus taught us to pray that God will deliver us from the enemy. Scripture is clear that we do not battle flesh and blood. We are in a fight against very real forces of evil in the spiritual realm (Ephesians 6:12). As believers, we can resist Satan, and he will flee from us (James 4:7). Asking for God's supernatural protection is a privilege for His children. His Word says He will protect us (1 Thessalonians 3:3).

The Lord's Prayer is certainly not the only prayer, but it is a great model for us to attune our hearts to God. As Dallas Willard says in *The Divine Conspiracy*, "It [the Lord's Prayer] is a prayer that teaches us to pray. It is a foundation of the praying life: its introduction and its continuing basis. It is an enduring framework for all praying. You only move beyond it provided you stay within it. It is the necessary bass in the great symphony of prayer. It is a powerful lens through which one constantly sees the world as God himself sees it."³

A healthy church is a praying church, and our public prayers in worship reflect our private prayer lives. We should take seriously the command to pray for one another in our private prayer times (James 5:16) and trust that as God grows and matures us individually, He also grows and matures us as a congregation. Prayer is not one-way communication. It is the vital lifeline between believers and God and is our sacred opportunity to communicate with God, who hears and responds to His people (Psalms 6:9; 18:6; 34:4)

DISCUSS

- *Why do you think Jesus condemned the prayers of the religious leaders?*
- *How is the prayer of "hypocrites" different than public prayer in churches and Bible studies today?*
- *What part of the Lord's Prayer speaks to your heart today and why?*

GOSPEL FOCUS

In these passages, we experience the astonishing privileges of being God's children. We are free to worship Him with glad and sincere hearts and to experience a glimmer of the joy that will be ours for eternity. We are free to give generously and to join God in serving others and reaching people for Christ. Finally, we are free to talk to God freely and openly. As His children, we can come boldly before Him, trusting that He will meet our needs.

These freedoms weren't free. Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the only way possible for us to have a relationship with God, to partner with Him in ministry, and to communicate with Him freely. If you've never by faith accepted Christ as your Savior, you are missing the joy and benefits of being a child of God. What would prevent you from saying yes to Jesus today?



REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *How do you think we should prepare our hearts for worship? What debates might we get caught up in regarding worship that don't actually matter?*
- *Why do you think Jesus put so much emphasis on privacy in our expressions of giving and prayer? How can pride hinder our worship and relationship with God?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

What about today's text encouraged you? Challenged you? Was there something in today's text that made you think about what it means to be a healthy church in a new way?

APPLY

Is there an area of your private expression of faith that needs adjustment? How could you set your heart toward worship when you are not at church? Are there things you need to reevaluate about your commitment to generosity? How might God be calling you to pray with more intention? What do you need to do this week to move toward being a healthier part of church life?

REFERENCES

¹ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

² Francis Chan, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013), 137.

³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: Harper, 1998).