

“The Worship Response”
Psalm 22:23-31; Deut. 10:17-22;
Romans 11:30-12:3; John 4:19-26

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Jesus said, “God is spirit.” That’s quite a statement. We have been talking a little bit over the last three or four weeks about the nature of God: God as one who comes to us in Jesus Christ, incarnate; logos, the expression of God creating the world; the expression of God made real, identifying Jesus. We talked about God the Father or God the Creator, Sustainer, the one who seems so far away and yet, full of power. One that has more the sense of a parental position rather than a companion. Then, we talked about the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, the one who comes along side, the one who exhorts, teaches, is present. Then Jesus says, “God is spirit.” Somehow all three of these are tied up in that statement: God Is Spirit.

I’ve talked about how hard I think it is to think about what spirit is today. Our language struggles with that. So as I often do, I looked up the Greek word to get a definition. One of the definitions for spirit is the idea of wind or breath, but another one is *supernatural non-material being*. For me, that isn’t a very helpful definition. I don’t know what supernatural really means because it’s hard sometimes for me to define what’s natural, let alone what’s supernatural. Besides that, what’s supernatural these days makes me begin to think about movies and special effects, and it is not that helpful. What does it mean to say God’s not natural, God is something else? In some ways, I want to say God is the ultimate natural, the one that gave us what’s natural. So I struggle with that definition.

Then, it says *non-material being*. If you say to someone on the street that that’s a non-material being, they would probably say that means it’s not real. I think our society has begun to look at anything non-material as anything that is not real.

I think we have to try to delve a little deeper and understand what spirit means. Spirit is definitely something we don’t necessarily see. We think about that with wind—we’ve talked about that. Another way of describing spirit that comes directly out of a lexicon is *inner life, self, state of mind*. That seems a little strange, too. We make the spirit a psychological entity. But it does get at the idea that we’re trying to use language we understand. What is spirit? Jesus says God is spirit.

The way we think about spirit includes this sense that it’s not a rock. Even if this rock I have here looks a little like a brain, it doesn’t make it animate, does it? I have a friend who I sometimes struggle with when we talk about God. She wants to talk about God as the universe. I struggle with that because when I think of the universe, I think of the rocks, I think of the things. I think of the material part of it all, or even the forces involved. I don’t think God is just a force. God is more than a rock. God is more than the stuff of the universe. When Jesus says God is spirit, I think he’s saying God is more than the stuff of the universe. God has thoughts, feelings, is able to engage. He’s dynamic. That is one of the things we think about when we talk about spirit. Why do we

say we have school spirit or team spirit? There's a sense of something really dynamic. It's partly that sense of spirit. That's why we use the image of wind, because wind is dynamic; it's moving. God is animate, real, alive in a way that we think of when we think of spirit.

I have been going over an area we have already traversed in thinking about Jesus and God the Father and Holy Spirit. But it is again to remember the dynamic, the personal nature of who God is when we say God is spirit. When Jesus says this, he says it in the context of worship. That's another reason to think again about who God is.

I like the way Paul sums it up. When we think about God, we think about everything being from God, through God, and to God. And the very next thing he says is, "To God be the glory forever." If you've ever gone to a doctor that wanted to test your reflexes and tapped your knee, you have a response that just happens. We know we have habitual responses. We have a response to danger: a fight/flight or play dead response. Paul is noting that when he thinks about the wonder of who God is, the natural response for him is the worship response. To God be the glory.

It is as we think about the wonder of who God is, it's appropriate to think about that natural response of worship. So what is worship? How would you define it? Well, again, the Greek word that is used there means to bow down, to prostrate yourself. So it comes to mean something along the lines of expressing an attitude of one's allegiance and regard for God. Allegiance and regard.

Sometimes when I think about coming to worship, I think about what I'm going to get out of worship. And yet, the word *worship* is really about bringing *to* God our allegiance and respect. Another word we don't use too much: we bring our veneration, which is our adoration, our honor, our respect, and our admiration. We bring all of that. We come because we remember how great God is.

When Paul says we bring our spiritual worship, that's an interesting translation of that word because it's the same root as *logos*. It's not the *pneuma* word that is most often used for spirit. It comes from the word root *logos*, so what it means is to say if Jesus is the *logos* of God, God expressing himself to us in a real way, God's love incarnate, what are we bringing that we are making real to God? How are we expressing ourselves? One of the ways it's translated is *genuine*. How do we bring what's genuinely coming from us, a willingness to honor and respect and adore and thank God.

Jesus says we worship in spirit and in truth. So we also are bringing our ability to think and feel and engage and make decisions and our energy to worship. We're not rocks! It makes me wonder—we've got a history of being so fully engaged in the world view, of thinking of the material things, of being able to rationalize, that I wonder if sometimes we get caught in that rut and don't bring our feelings, don't bring our more animate selves.

If you're going to be in a relationship with somebody, it's nice if you do more than just talk at them. Sometimes that feels like what I do—I talk at you. That's not the point. The point is that we're trying to think together about this God that we are worshiping and wondering about, that we're perhaps coming in awe of, and how that God has touched our lives. The wonder of God giving us life, giving us all of creation and continuing to sustain it. God redeems it, forgives the mistakes we've made. He leads us into new life.

When Jesus says we worship in spirit and in truth, I think he's saying that we worship with all of who we are and what is real to us. Truth has a sense of reality to it. Perhaps that's why he gives us a thing like the table to come to, because sometimes we want to make spiritual simply be that non-material stuff, like it's not infused in what we do. It is infused in what we do when we come to the table. He's inviting us to bring all of who we are because that's the genuine nature of who we are. It's our spiritual self. We just don't want to forget the thinking and feeling and active and dynamic sense of who we are. He wants to put it in context for us around a table.

Sometimes when we come to the table, I think what we think of is what Jesus did in terms of redeeming us and forgiving us, but there's a sense that we come as well. In the present, what he's doing in the very act of inviting us to come around the table is creating a fellowship, enabling us to be children of God. That incredibly wonderful God that invites us to come genuinely, without pretense or pretending, but to come as we are, to come for what we need, but to also to come expressing the wonder and the thanksgiving for who God is, recognizing it's God who feeds us, redeems us, and gives us life.

Worship is a wonderful thing. It's a time to remember the awe and the wonder and to notice out of that awe and wonder how God does some very practical arms-around-us kinds of things like bringing us to the table to be the people of God. We are invited to come to the heart of worship, to come and remember the wonder of who God is and to hear his invitation to be his people. Amen.