

Corporate Worship – Core Value #3

John 4:22-24

Intro. This AM I want to talk about the third of ten core values our leadership team has identified as essential and foundational to MBC. Our plan is to use a Sunday early in each month to present one of these values until we've covered all ten.

Now to be sure we're all on the same page let me again explain what we mean by "Core Values." By core values we're talking about the deeply held beliefs of our church. Our doctrinal statement defines what we believe the Bible teaches. But core values are guiding principles from the Scriptures that direct our behavior and support our purpose and vision. These core values are things that matter to us and define who we are. Because our core values derive from God's Word, they're not elastic. They're solid and inflexible. We might say, *"Each core value represents a hill worth dying on."* Let me briefly review the first two:

#1. Biblical Foundation – *God's Word is the basis for our lives and ministries. Matt. 7:24 - "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.* Here Jesus compared hearing His Word with obedience to a foundation strong enough to withstand the storms of life. In a climate where everything once believed is up for grabs, it's imperative for us to maintain confidence in the Word of God which is absolute, firm and settled forever. (I Pet. 1:25)

#2. The Centrality of the Church – *The Church is the center of Christ's ongoing redemptive activity in the world.* In Matt. 16:18 Jesus told Peter, *"...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."* We who believe and are saved are not only members of this church Christ is building, but we are co-laborers together with Him. Despite all of our warts and wrinkles / weaknesses and failures...Jesus loves the church and so must we. One day, perhaps very soon, He'll return in the clouds to claim His Bride. As one body we'll rise to meet Him in the air. Until that day, we're to forgive / accept / love / support / encourage / and pray for each other. Whoever said the Church on earth would be perfect? Yet the Church is the center of God's redemptive program in the world. It's exciting to be part of something with eternal consequence that can't fail.

3. Corporate Worship - So this AM we come to our third core value...the value of corporate worship. We state our conviction this way...God created us to encounter Him in worship as we exalt Him through music, His Word, prayer and testimony.****

Why do you suppose it's necessary for us to state what is patently obvious to so many? Why must we spend time affirming the importance of corporate worship? I'll tell you why...Statistics gathered by the Barna Group show that church attendance among American Christians is declining.

Here's a lesson from history that begs to be heard. Around the year 1510, a delegation of Christians from Sudan, which had been recently overrun by Muslim conquest, went to the Christian Ethiopian Court and begged the emperor for assistance. The Christians who remained in Sudan needed clergy to lead worship / administer the ordinances / and teach the people. But the emperor refused. He sent the delegation away empty-handed. With no Christian worship and within the space of 100 years, Christianity in Sudan became extinct and forgotten until the twentieth century.

This may seem like a radical statement, but this same scenario which has all but eliminated Christianity in several European countries is now unfolding in America. We are steadily being overtaken by Muslim presence and influence. At the same time, our government offers neither sympathy nor assistance to Christian churches or faith-based organizations.

Instead, our courts and legislators regularly take the side of those who oppose what we believe. As all this is happening from without, many are abandoning the Church and internally, the Church is becoming increasingly secularized.

But what can you and I do about this? We can pray and make a fresh commitment to remain faithful. Since the Church is made up of individual believers, the larger picture is affected by each one who claims to belong to Christ. But when asked about church attendance or involvement, many say, *“I worship God in private...you know, when I’m out in the woods or looking up at the stars. I don’t need the church to worship.”* I think I’ve lived long enough to know that’s “code” for a Christian in a back-slidden condition...a Christian going nowhere spiritually! The truth runs closer to this...People who disengage from an assembly of believers, soon cease from worshipping God. Just like a glowing ember removed from a fire pit, the passion of a disengaged Christian quickly degrades. This AM I want to offer an explanation for why the decline in church participation. At the same time, I want to suggest who among those claiming to be Christians are most susceptible to falling away. The answer relates to one matter of utmost importance...the matter of worship.

1. **The priority of worship - Jn. 4:22- 24**

Let’s take a look at **Jn. 4:22-24**. As you may know already, Jesus here did something that was unthinkable to the Jews. He engaged in conversation with a woman from Samaria of all places. According to norms of that day, this was inappropriate on several levels. But that aside, notice what He said to her...**“You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”**

Since Bible study begins with observation, what do you think the subject is in **Jn. 4:22-24**? Here’s a hint...notice that **worship** and **worshipers** is repeated 7x’s in these three verses? Here Jesus explained that true worship must be a spiritual exercise that is intelligent and governed by God’s truth. The Samaritans lacked the truth and the Jews lacked the spirit. Carl Laney explains it this way... *“Because ‘God is Spirit’ (which means, without material being), worship must be bound up with spiritual realities, not physical formalities. Consequently, true worship is not limited by time, place or ceremony. To worship ‘in truth’ means we must worship the true God, honestly, genuinely, and from the heart.”* But notice...Jesus said, **they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks**. This is important. What is God most interested in finding among us? He is seeking men and women who will worship Him from their hearts and according to His truth.

Some great Bible words have been substituted for **worship** and **worshipers**. We might say, “God is seeking disciples / or God is seeking leaders / or God is seeking teachers / or faithful servants / or godly examples / or soul-winners. But that isn’t what the verse says, is it? It says God is seeking **worshipers**. The point is this...the **worship** of God is the primary obligation of every human being. **Worship** is the appropriate human response to who God is and all He has done. To be a **worshiper** is the one description that summarizes and encompasses everything else we ought to be in relation to the God who made us / owns us / loves us / redeemed us / and holds our lives in His hands. In other words, **worship** is the non-negotiable priority for all who claim to know God. Everything else flows out of the reverence and blessing we offer Him.

2. **The purity of worship - Rom. 11:35-12:2**

Most Christians are familiar with **Rom. 12:1**. The chapter division between chaps. **11** and **12** is unfortunate because **11:35, 36** actually sets up **Rom. 12:1**.

11:35, 36 say. **"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.** The next word is **Therefore...** The fact that God is debtor to no human being and out-gives us on every level is motivation for the worship we should offer Him in return. So **12:1** says, **Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.**

This passage deserves a separate study. But notice here...whatever is offered to God must be pure. Because God is holy, He will not accept anything that is defiled and impure. So before any person offers their life to God, they must be cleansed and purified by faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. This principle is illustrated early in the Bible by the story of Cain and Abel. Cain's sacrifice was not accepted because it represented his own way of approaching God. Abel's sacrifice was accepted because he followed God's commands and offered what God required. But we need to define what we mean by the term **worship**. Because of our clear lakes and with no reference to Flint's tap water, our state motto is "Pure Michigan." But what is meant by pure worship?

Let's look up at the screens and read **Psa. 96:1-10** together. **Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns."** Notice to whom worship is directed...7x's the Psalmist urges us to express our worship **to the Lord**. The pure expressions listed here include **singing / praise / proclamation / declaration / ascribing glory and worship to the Lord**. Worship then, is about giving something to God. People attend church for a variety of reasons. But most often, we come expecting to receive something. We may go away unsatisfied if we don't get what we hoped for. But worship isn't about us getting something...it's about God and giving something to Him. And though it's a paradox, the more adoration we offer the Lord the more we will get out of worship.

The word **worship** derives from the idea of worth and worthiness. **Psa. 96:4** says, **For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;** When the Church and every other being in heaven is seen worshipping God in **Rev. 5**, their theme is precisely this...the worthiness of Jesus Christ. **Rev. 5:12** says, **In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"** A good definition for worship from Dr. Warren Wiersbe goes like this: *"Worship is the believer's response of all that they are – mind, emotions, will, body – to what God is and says and does."*

In his book, Real Worship, Dr. Wiersbe writes from decades of experience in church leadership. He lists some religious trends he has observed and experienced first hand. He writes...*"In the early years of my ministry, I was told that **separation** was the secret of a successful church; but then I saw 'separated churches' fight among themselves, split and splinter, and sometimes hurt the testimony of Christ in a community. While I believe in biblical separation, I do not believe it is the source of spiritual blessing unless it is the byproduct of true spiritual worship...Then I was told that **evangelism** was the main thing. If each church member would only start witnessing and winning the lost our churches would be transformed...Evangelism is an essential part of the church's ministry, but it must be the result of worship, or it will not glorify God or produce lasting results...No sooner did the evangelism fad start to fade when somebody suggested that **missions** was the key to a spiritual church...*

But nobody explained to us that missions, like separation and evangelism, must be a product of worship; otherwise it's only the latest gimmick to motivate the church, and the motivation will not last."

Though each emphasis is valid, something more basic and essential cries out for our attention. It's the priority of worship. Worship is to be the main thing in the life of every believer! Worship lifts us from our little world of concerns and brings us into the presence of the God who is over everything. Worship should be our highest priority and greatest continual delight. During the course of our lives, the quality of our worship should grow deeper and more passionate as we each grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. But unfortunately, this isn't always the case. One of our main duties as church leaders is to fight off complacency and lead our congregations in a deepening experience of what it means to worship the God who is worthy.

3. The private side of worship - Richard Foster wrote, *"The divine priority is worship first, service second. Our lives are to be punctuated with praise, thanksgiving, and adoration. Service flows out of worship. Service as a substitute for worship is idolatry. One grave temptation we all face is to run around answering calls to service without ministering to the Lord Himself."* Foster points out how doing for God is often substituted for ministering to God. This distinction is critical. Worship is directed to God as we found in **Psa. 96**. This same direction is declared in **Eph. 5:19** which says, **Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord...** Singing is to originate in our hearts which suggests heart preparation. Just mouthing words isn't worship unless our hearts are engaged. And singing is to be directed to the Lord. We sing for Him and to Him.

The fact that worship is to be the uncontested priority in our lives is demonstrated by the example of Martha and Mary in **Luke 10:38-42** - **As Jesus and His disciples were on their way, He came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."**

Now just so we're on the same page...Jesus didn't diminish or downplay household chores. He didn't advocate dirty dishes piled to the ceiling or suggest that meals would miraculously appear if women were more spiritual. That isn't what He meant. Instead, Jesus addressed a scenario that plays out many times among committed church workers. Martha was distracted. Guests were coming for dinner. She was overwhelmed by the chores and upset that others weren't working up a sweat the way she was. Her focus shifted from doing to what others weren't doing. Now this happens! As she busied herself, she may have begun to feel self-congratulatory and mildly superior. You see, Martha spelled devotion to Christ this way...W-O-R-K. So in her distress, she did what believers affected by "otheritis" do, she blurted out her complaint. **"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"** And Jesus said, *"You are so right Martha ...Mary isn't pulling her weight or serving as feverishly as you are. I'll get after her because as we all know...work is God's love language. It's the main thing God is looking for."* No! That isn't what Jesus said! He said, **"Martha, Martha...you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."**

Martha was sure nothing was **better** than slavish labor for Jesus. But there is something better. It's characterized in **v.39** - **Mary...sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said.** Mary had **chosen** to be a **worshiper**. Make a note of this...worship is a choice. Mary spelled devotion to Christ, not W-O-R-K but W-O-R-S-H-I-P. She had the **chosen** the right posture and the right response to Jesus. She was sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to Him.

She gave the Lord her full attention. Her focus was Jesus, not the dinner party. Focus and attentiveness are essential ingredients of worship as they were for Samuel who said, **“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.” – I Sam. 3:9**

Now the core value we’re talking about this AM is the value of corporate worship. But here’s the thing ...the quality of our worship when the church is gathered is really the sum of the parts. The worship of the group one day a week is qualified by the worship of the individual members the other six days. In our private lives we must practice worship as a lifestyle. But Sunday is game day. It’s the day when we join together to put into play what we’ve practiced all week.

But there are so many distractions Monday through Saturday! I know there are. Jesus explained how to avoid distractions in **Matt. 6:6**. There He said, **But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.** We all need a quiet place where we can practice tuning out distractions and focusing on God...a place of solitude. Do you have such a time and place? This matter of private worship has always been troublesome for me. I’m a talker / a doer / a builder / a hands-on guy. It takes real effort for me to be quiet before the Lord. My mind quickly wanders to unfinished business...good things that beg to be done. I’d make a crummy monk or mystic. For these reasons I’ve found it challenging to maintain a consistent prayer life. I need to be more like Mary and less like Martha. (In this age when Bruce Jenner was voted woman of the year, I hope you’ll keep that statement in context.) But I’ve come to realize that private worship is a discipline I can’t live without and neither can you. I’m sure many of us struggle to worship God privately!

Do you know what NT worship is for a child of God? It’s like breathing. In the process of breathing, we inhale and exhale. Worship is breathing in grace and breathing out praise. This is a valid biblical analogy because the last psalm ends this way...**Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. - Psalms 150:6** In the NT, the Greek word *pneuma* is translated *wind, breath or spirit*. The Holy Spirit who indwells every believer is as close to us as our next breath. In **Psa. 40:3** the psalmist David said, **He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD.** As David breathed in grace, he breathed out hymns of praise. His songs became his tool of evangelism. This how we should live out our days. We should acknowledge God and contemplate the wonder of His grace each day and throughout the day. In **Psa.16:8** David wrote, **I have set the LORD always before me.** As we continuously think about the Lord and how good He is, our response is worship. We proclaim His worthiness as we read His Word / through prayer / by words of praise and thanksgiving we speak / and even by singing when appropriate. When God is always on our minds, His praise will always be on our lips.

I’m sure many of you remember Gary and Amy Wixtrom who were here for our Christmas Pops Concert. Gary and I enjoyed a conversation about worship. He said something like this...*“When I look up at the night sky believing God created every star, I am worshiping Him. When I look at that tiny miracle a young mother cradles in her arms and confess that child is a gift from God...I am worshiping the Giver. When I thank God for watching over us another day, I am worshiping Him. When an old Gospel hymn or chorus comes to mind and I begin to hum it or sing it out loud, I am worshiping God. When I’m tempted some way and a Bible verse keeps me from stumbling...I am worshipping the God of the Bible.”* You see, worship though infinitely profound, is simply *“the believer’s response of all that they are – mind, emotions, will, body – to what God is and says and does.”* So the Christian must learn to practice worship in private. Worship should be as important and as natural to us as breathing. As we worship we discover an order and a design for our lives that we ignore at our peril. If our lives are cluttered or overwhelmed, we need to reorient ourselves toward God who gives each day as a gift. We were created to praise Him. With our hearts and minds oriented toward God, we won’t be so critical of others / so weighed down by everyday life / so self-absorbed. John Calvin wrote *“To know God is to be changed by God; true knowledge of God leads to worship.”* I sincerely doubt corporate worship will mean much until we practice the grace of worshipping God privately.

4. *The power of corporate worship – Acts 2:44-47*

Even though worship must be practiced in private, God never intended for worship to be a solo. From the earliest chapters in Bible history, God redeemed a nation to praise Him. The worship of the Tabernacle and later the Temple, was always corporate. It was always about God's people gathered to offer Him praise and thanksgiving. It always involved sacrifice / singing / prayers / free-will offerings / and the reading of His Law. The corporate worship of the OT carries over to the NT where we find the first Christians gathered on the first day of the week. **Acts 2:44-47 - All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.** The togetherness of these first believers is unmistakable! Unlike worship at the Temple which the law required 3x's a year, NT believers freely assemble once a week.

Don Whitney writes, *"There's an element of worship and Christianity that cannot be experienced in private worship or by watching worship. There are some graces and blessings that God only gives in the 'meeting together' with other believers."*

As strange and far out as it may seem, at least one denomination is responding to declining numbers with an online community tailored for "terribly busy people." They've called it, *"Extravagance."* They describe the experiment this way... *"This brief moment of worship for people on the run (emphasis on 'brief') allows worshippers to participate online and then post their thoughts on Facebook."* Is it just me or is this approach pretty far removed from the corporate worship of the NT where believers actually greeted each other with a holy kiss? How does this relate to **Heb.10:25** which says, **Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.** Some ideas are just plain dumb!

Corporate worship is like an orchestra playing in concert as opposed to private worship or the music produced by a single instrument. Think of the energy of a full orchestra. Think of the combination of tonal sounds and harmonies. Think of the coordination of various members under the leadership of a conductor. The worship of the church is a concert of blessing offered to God. When we reflect on who God is and all He has done our response to Him should be sincere / passionate / and from the heart. As a believer, I want to be part of that joyful noise, don't you?

One of the great obstacles to corporate worship is the endless variety of potential distractions that arise especially when a large group of people come together. First, we each have our own worries and concerns...like the need of a job / an upcoming exam / the argument in the car en route to church / or the class we're scheduled to teach next hour. But along with these personal matters, all sorts of distractions surround us. (Like the pastor's 2 year old grand daughter who burped like a trucker...or that song we didn't know or like...or the National Championship game tomorrow night...or the ugly sweater in front of us...or the guy whose chair fell off the choir riser. Unless we discipline ourselves to put these things aside, we'll be distracted from the main event. The focus of worship is to be God Himself. But every Sunday morning our focus can be stolen from God and given to any number of things. Let me finish with an exhortation from **Heb. 12:28 - Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe...** Is that your experience? Is your heart filled with thankfulness as you think about God? Is your mind captivated by a sense of reverence and awe when you come? Maybe we would do it better in here if we practiced more out there. The only chance we have to stem the decline in church attendance is to worship God in a way that is sincere, passionate, and compelling. But that's not why we worship...we worship because God is worthy of nothing less!