

When our son Jonathan was in high school, he invited a friend to come to our house to watch a movie. His friend declined. Jonathan was confused, so he asked why he didn't want to come to our house. *"Because your dad wouldn't want me there,"* his friend replied. Jonathan was even more puzzled by that answer, so he asked *"why would you say that? My dad has never met you."* *"Because your dad is a pastor"* the friend replied. That confused him even more, so he asked what my job had to do with it. *"Because I'm gay,"* his friend said, *"and Christians hate gays."*

Jonathan knew his friend was gay, but it made no difference to him. So the conversation upset him. And since he was still upset when he got home, he told me about the conversation. And it broke my heart. For here was a teenager who had not been raised in the church. He knew nothing of Christian theology. He knew no one in our church. But one thing he did know was that *"Christians hate gays."* The reason that statement broke my heart is I have to believe that it must also break God's heart that some of His children are known for what (or who) they HATE rather than for who (or what) they LOVE. Which for Christians is supposed to be a God who *"so loved the world that He sent His only Son so that whoever believes in Him might not perish."*

I share that because as we looked at the question *"What Is This Thing Called Worship?"* last week, we learned that since Psalm 95 says that what we love is what we worship, and what we worship is what we center our lives around, it can be a problem if we center our lives around something - or someone - other than God. For according to Jesus, what we center our lives around can't be God and something else: it will be one or the other, as we will *"hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other."* And if that is true in answer to the question *"What Is This Thing Called Worship?"* it is even more true in answer to the question *"Who Should We Worship?"* That is because we BECOME what we WORSHIP.

In a book titled Worship, Louie Giglio explains this by writing that *"whatever you worship, you become obsessed with. [And] whatever you become obsessed with, you imitate. [And] what you imitate, you become."* And the reason for that, he writes, is that *"whatever you value most will ultimately determine who you are. If you worship money, you'll become greedy. If you worship some sinful habit, that sin will grip your soul and poison your character. If you worship stuff, your life will become material, void of eternal significance. [And] if you give all your praise to the god of YOU, you'll become deluded with self, a disappointing little god to both yourself and the people who trust in you."* Which is why Giglio says the writer of Psalm 115 wrote *"Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory."*

For it is only when we give God glory by worshiping Him and not ourselves (or any other thing or person in His creation), that we can center our lives around the ONLY being in the universe that can help us become - and forever be - the beings we were created to be. We see this in the very first chapter of the Bible when God says He created us in His *"image."* For since we are *"like"* God, it means we were created for relationship - and not just with other humans, but first and foremost with God. That is because the being in whose *"image"* or *"likeness"* we were created is a being of triune relationship: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, it stands to reason that a being of triune relationship would create us to be in relationship with Him.

This is why in the Exodus story we are told how as the people of Israel left Egypt, God laid out how to be in relationship with Him in 10 commands, saying in the first “*you shall have no other gods before me,*” and in the second “*you shall not make for yourself an idol.*” For God didn't give that first command because He thought there were other gods with whom we might seek to be in relationship. And He didn't give the second because He failed to realize a carved hunk of wood couldn't develop divine powers. He gave those commands because unless He made clear how to live in relationship with Him, we might get confused and worship ourselves (believing the world centers around us like Adam and Eve) or worship something - or someone - else (and believe IT or THEY will give us happiness, as Cain and the people of Noah's day). And if we do that, we will suffer, for other people and created things make lousy gods.

This is also why when Satan showed Jesus “*all the kingdoms of the world . . . and said to him, ‘if you worship me, it will all be yours,’*” Jesus replied “*it is written: ‘worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’*” It is why Jesus said “*what good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*” And it is why Luke says that when Paul walked around Athens, and saw an inscription on an altar that said “*TO AN UNKNOWN GOD,*” his heart also broke.

For worship is more than what we do in a church service. Worship is more than what we do as we walk in a park or look up at the sky on a moonlit night. Worship is what we do in relation to what we believe to be the ultimate reality in life. Worship is what we do in response to what we believe to be the center of all things. And worship is what we do in centering our lives around what we believe to be the ultimate reality of life. That is because in centering our lives around a particular thing (or person), we are showing what (or who) we love. To help us figure out WHO we should therefore love and worship, let's turn to the passage from Acts.

As we get to chapter 17 Paul was on his second missionary journey, revisiting the churches he had established in his first journey. As he came into Athens, he was “*distressed to see that the city was full of idols.*” And the reason he was distressed was that the first two commands God had given to those who wanted to be in relationship with Him was “*you shall have no other gods before me,*” and “*you shall not make for yourself an idol.*” So Paul told the people “*as I walked around . . . I found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.*” It is also why he then told them about the One True God.

In the rest of chapter 17, Luke tells us about the content of what Paul said. And in that content, we are given the answer to the question “*Who Should We Worship?*” But the answer is not just “*Worship the One True God.*” It is not just “*Worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*” And it is not even just “*Worship Jesus.*” What Paul told them is that the only being worthy of centering our lives around is a God who is perfect love, complete mercy, and absolute justice. Let's ponder those 3 traits.

First, Paul says God is a being of LOVE. Paul told the people “*the God who made the world and everything in it . . . does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath.*” In the ancient

world, each religion had its own version of how life came to be, how people were created, and how relationship with the gods functions. In most stories, there was chaos. As a result, the relationship people had with their gods was said to be unstable and dangerous. But Paul told the people of Athens that Genesis says God intentionally “*made the world and everything in it*” as an act of love. For “*He does not live in temples built by human hands,*” and He “*is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything,*” Paul says. Instead, God “*GIVES everyone life . . . and breath . . . and everything else.*”

Second, Paul says God is a being of MERCY. Paul told the people of Athens that “[God] *made all the nations . . . so that they would seek him and . . . perhaps . . . reach out for Him.*” This is Paul’s summary of the Genesis creation story, where God not only lovingly created the world - and all the humans within it - but did so that “*perhaps*” they might “*reach out for Him and find Him.*” Paul used the word “*perhaps*” intentionally. For God isn’t a dictator. God gives people room to make mistakes. He gives people space to figure things out instead of just ordering them about. And He does so as an act of MERCY. For even when God told the people of Israel how NOT to seek to be in relationship with Him in the first two commandments, His intent was not to command them to follow a narrow path of how they - in lockstep - MUST be in relationship with Him. The commandments were intended to be guide rails that helped people walk with God and not wander off the path to one side or the others. As a result, there is room for individuality and different paces in growing in our relationship with God.

Third, Paul says God is a being of JUSTICE. Paul says that while God is LOVE and MERCY, He is not weak. He is loving and merciful, “*so [we] might seek him and . . . perhaps . . . reach out for Him*” even if we don’t do it perfectly, or stray and need to come back again and again. But God also knows that because He gave humans free will, bad things can happen. We can worship other gods. We can worship other people. And we can worship ourselves. And when we worship anything - or anyone - bad things will happen and evil will rise up. So, Paul says God, whose LOVE and MERCY are not His only qualities, also acts in JUSTICE.

For while in His love and mercy “*in the past God overlooked such ignorance*” Paul told the people of Athens that God “*commands all people to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. [Jesus] [And] He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead.*” To ponder if you truly worship the Triune God, and not some THING or some ONE other than God, I invite you to do several things.

First, I invite you to ask yourself if people would use the phrase “*LOVING*” to describe how you interact with them. Ponder if your manner of relating to others builds them up and seeks their best interest, or if it bosses them around and uses them to build up your own little kingdom.

Second, I invite you to ask yourself if people would use the phrase “*MERCIFUL*” to describe you. Ponder whether or not they would use that word to describe you to react to them when they mess up. Ask yourself if your manner with people is one that helps them make amends, or if it is one that drags them through the mud first - and makes it more difficult to repent.

Finally, I invite you ask yourself if people would use the word “*JUST*” to describe you. Ponder if they would say you act fairly toward other people. Ask yourself if your manner with others is one that creates a level playing field, or if you have one set of requirements for YOU (that are easy to achieve and easily forgiven when missed) and another set of requirements for EVERYONE ELSE (that are stringent and do not easily get forgiveness when missed).

In the Bible, God says those 3 qualities are good ones to use to tell you - and the world - WHAT or WHO you worship, for those are some of the most important qualities of God. For as Louie Giglio writes, “*whatever you worship, you become obsessed with. [And] whatever you become obsessed with, you imitate. [And] what you imitate, you become.*” Earlier in Acts, Luke tells us that “*for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church [in Antioch] and taught great numbers of people. [As a result] the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.*”

Maybe those followers of Jesus in Antioch earned the name “*Christian*” because they acted like Christ - not only worshipping a God of love, mercy, and justice, but becoming so obsessed with imitating Him that they actually became people of LOVE, and MERCY, and JUSTICE. If so, let us follow their example as WE answer the question “*Who Should We Worship?*” not just on Sunday but in every moment of the other 6 days as well.