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Personal Evangelism 101: Reject False Worship

Scripture: John 4:19–24

Code: B130606

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who worship God acceptably, and those who do not. And the fact is, apart from faith in Christ—apart from God's saving work in a sinner's life—acceptable worship is impossible.

Because worship is inextricably linked to salvation, it shouldn't be a surprise that the topic comes up in Christ's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. We've been looking at their interaction as a model for personal evangelism—last time we saw how Christ shockingly exposed and confronted her sin in John 4:16-18.

Her stunned reaction steers the conversation to the topic of worship.

The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." (John 4:19-20)

We've already discussed the origins of the Samaritan people—that they were the offspring of Jews who had intermarried with pagan Gentiles after the Assyrian invasion. One of the results of that intermarrying was the corruption of their faith. They kept the Pentateuch but adopted other pagan idols and rituals along with it, merging the sacrificial systems and creating a false, hybrid religion. They even built an alternate temple and altar on Mount Gerizim, not far from where Christ was talking with the woman.

Her question then is a simple one: She wants to know which religious system is correct. She's already acknowledged that Christ must be a prophet to know what He knows about her life. The guilt she spent so much time trying to avoid has now come down in full force on her head. Jesus has unmasked her as a sinner, and she wants to be right with God. And she knows that assuaging her guilt requires worship.

So she falls back on the only thing she knows: external religion. The fact is, *all* unrepentant sinners see worship as *external*. They cannot understand or appreciate the internal transformation that takes place in salvation, so they're left grasping at impotent ceremonies and rituals to absolve the guilt of their sins.

She wants to know which system of works holds the key to her absolution. Is it the Samaritan faith, a Judeo-pagan hybrid? Or is it the Jewish system, based solely on the Law and the Prophets? Which temple should she visit to reconcile with God? Where does she need to go and what does she need to do to find forgiveness and peace?

Christ's answer is monumental, giving us the most definitive teaching on the theology of worship in all the gospels. And it starts with a denunciation of external forms of worship.

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:21-24)

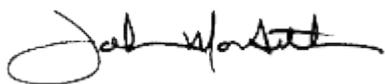
The Lord makes it clear that it's not *the place* where she worships that matters. What she's looking for is not dependent on a ceremony or ritual. Instead, true worship is about loving, honoring, obeying, and serving God from the heart.

Jesus' answer is a critique of the Samaritan faith, apostate Judaism, and any system of works-based salvation and righteousness. God was never interested in rituals and sacrifices alone—what always mattered most was the heart behind those acts of worship. That's why He condemned the hypocrisy of Israel's religion (cf. Amos 5:21-23; Malachi 1:6-14). Divorced from true faith in God, Israel's sacrificial system was a useless pantomime.

In His death, Christ abolished the sacrificial system once and for all. When He died, God miraculously shredded the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple, signifying the end of the Old Testament system and ratifying the New Covenant. There are no more temples, no more altars, and no more sacrifices. In Christ, every place is a sanctuary and every believer a priest. We no longer require mediation—we have the Spirit of God dwelling in us.

In this simple conversation, Christ ushers in a new era of worship—one that isn't bound to externals and symbols. True worship comes from the love of God and the knowledge of Scripture, and it can happen anywhere and everywhere.

That's a vital point when it comes to sharing the gospel with nonbelievers. Salvation isn't about praying a special prayer, walking an aisle, or any other ritual. It's about bowing to the Lord in repentance and faith, submitting to His Word, and worshiping Him in spirit and truth. Anything short of that is empty religion.



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