

INTRODUCTION  
Holy Living: Worship  
*by Matthew Eron Johnson*

In my own journey of living as a disciple of Jesus, spiritual practices have been essential. I have read and taught about the spiritual practices since I first began working in a church almost two decades ago. Even with my experience, the spiritual practices are a daunting subject. And worship is so central to the Christian tradition that it seems too big for a little book.

So, instead of being an exhaustive, academic exploration of worship, this book is an exploration of the elements of worship that have been most formative to me and to those who have shared the spiritual journey with me. The book aims to deepen our understanding of worship so that we can worship more fully. Because of this approach, what began as an overwhelming topic quickly became a space where I could personally draw closer to God.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to defining *worship*. To define it gives us clarity and richness. Along with

defining *worship*, we explore the concept of a Godward life. This is a life of turning toward God for guidance moment by moment and day by day. Such a life is fuel for genuine worship.

Chapter 2 focuses on the way worship shapes us. Here I draw upon my understanding of Christian spiritual formation in general and how the spiritual practices fit into that formation. Then we look at the specific impact of worship.

Chapter 3 links our formation as disciples of Jesus with Jesus' primary focus, which was the kingdom of God. As we are being formed into Christlikeness, we point to God's action in the world, and we grow in desiring what God desires.

Chapter 4 then allows us to play with the idea that worship can happen in unexpected places. As worship breaks out, our life becomes an increasingly joyful walk with God. My goal is for you to feel excited about practicing worship after reading this book.

Throughout the book, I offer "Active Applications." They are suggestions of steps you can take in regard to a point that has just been made. It is important that you understand that there are several Active Applications throughout the book, and it is not my intention for a reader to do all of them. In fact, attempting to do all of them could be an unhelpful burden. Instead, I would recommend noting in the margins any Active Applications that pique your interest, and

then return to them when you have finished the chapter.

## BLESSING

I live in Wichita, Kansas, which is also home to an amazing Christian bookstore called Eighth Day Books. I told the owner, Warren Farha, that I had written a book on worship. He pondered for just a moment and then said, “Well, Matthew, there is no topic of more significance. Gratitude is at the core of what it means to be human.”

As I pondered what Warren said, I remembered how much I have enjoyed writing this book: the research, the Scripture, the quotes, the stories, and the connections. I felt as if God was meeting me every day as I wrote. My hope for anyone who reads this book is that they will feel the same way. May you discover the worshipful life!



## CHAPTER ONE

# Broadening Worship

Many of us need a new, broader, and deeper understanding of worship. We have grown up with, or grown accustomed to, worship as a task on our to-do list. We have limited worship to a weekly gathering of Christians. We normally call it “church” when Christians come together to worship. But what if our understanding of worship is really just a shell of what worship could be?

I have found that my understanding of worship has grown broader and deeper as I have lived a life of following Christ. Like other things in life, I had worship in a box, and that box was too small. Breaking down those boxes can be a powerful experience. I had a similar experience with jazz, and I think that parallel can help us see the invitation that God is extending to us in terms of worship.

I grew up in rural Indiana and attended a small high school of roughly 200 students. Although we were small, we did have a music program

and even a jazz band, and I played trombone in the jazz band. I learned to read jazz charts, and I learned to mimic the swing of great jazz musicians that I listened to in recordings. It was fun. It was the highest quality our little band could produce. But none of us knew that we lacked the spirit of jazz.

Many years later, I led a team from my church in Kansas down to New Orleans to help with rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina. One man whom our team helped was a professional musician. In fact, he was a trombone player who had toured with Harry Connick Jr. At the end of our first week, he invited us to hear him play at a club called Tippetino's. My team was exhausted from the week of hard work, but we didn't want to miss this opportunity to eat great food and hear great music.

Tippetino's is a large, two-story dance hall with one stage and few seats. You come to dance. And that night, the place was packed. The musicians gathered on stage and began to play. And for the first time, I experienced the spirit of jazz. Oh, I had heard jazz, certainly. I had listened for hours to recordings of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and others. But I had never experienced anything like this. It wasn't just the music, it was the entire atmosphere.

The musicians began with a song, giving us the melody. The crowd responded by immediately

moving to the music (not something that ever happened at my high school jazz band concerts). After playing through the melody, the band grew quieter as the trumpet player stepped forward and improvised a solo that hinted at the melody. As the solo grew, I noticed that the trombone player walked over to the clarinet player and improvised a simple background part. It was short and repetitive.

The clarinet player listened for a few bars and then contributed something to what the trombone player had offered. All the while the solo continued to grow in volume and complexity, and the bass and the drums were keeping it all together and also building with intensity.

Eventually, the saxophone joined the trombone and the clarinet with more harmony. As all of this unfolded, the crowd hung on every note, moving to the music. The soloist, the rest of the band, and the crowd (who would shout out from time to time), were all listening to one another and feeding off one another's energy. The music and the room kept building with anticipation.

Finally, the entire ensemble returned to the central melody of the piece, at full volume. The crowd went wild, yelling and dancing in full motion. Then the band grew quiet again. This time, the clarinet took the solo; and the whole process started again, built again, and released again. It was a powerful interaction of music,

musician, and crowd. I had finally witnessed the spirit of jazz.

What if our life of discipleship with Jesus, living in relationship with the Trinity, is meant to be more like this jazz experience at Tippetino's? How many of us are still worshipping as if we are middle-school jazz musicians? What if the worshipping we've been doing is only a shadow of the experience that worship can be?

What if worship was an interactive and synergistic experience that happened in planned and unplanned moments of life? What if worship was the result of our relationship with God that shaped the way we interact with others and our community?

### WORSHIP, JAZZ, AND THE SONG OF GOD'S LOVE

I have found in my experience of jazz music an analogy for the way we worship. The title of the song we are playing is "God's Grace!" The melody of the song is a fixed thing. It doesn't change. The melody symbolizes organized worship. It is structured and gives a framework for our community's gathered time of worship.

Now, if we stopped here, it wouldn't have to be jazz. It could be a hymn or any other song—a fixed thing that starts and stops. But worship doesn't stop at the end of the worship hour. The song goes on after we leave our church service. When we step out into the world, we enter into the role of the back-up musicians. God is the

soloist, playing a tune. Our responsibility is to keep listening for that solo and to complement what God is doing with our lives and our words.

As we complement God's solo with our background parts, we find others who are playing back-up for God as well. They are people who are responding to God's song of grace. As we join one another in offering back-up to God, community begins to form and we are not alone. Instead, we are with a band of others. We find energy and joy in our work together, and we shape the world around us.

While all this is happening, there is a crowd listening. The crowd is the world—our coworkers, our neighbors, our friends, our family members, our enemies. Many of them are waiting for a melody that will make sense of the cacophony of life. They are attracted to the song of God's grace, joy, and abundance. They are curious to meet people who will actually play along with that song rather than playing along with the song of isolation, despair, hatred, scarcity, and shame. When they start to hear the song of God's grace, they can't help but to move, dance, and call out for more.

And all of these interactions can feed and fuel one another, building in intensity until we return to the original melody, which is organized worship. We return to our weekly gathering with new energy and life. And there we hear again the melody, but now we are more energized because we

are bringing with us all that we have heard and seen and felt while we were out in the world. We must shout about what God has done, or else the stones will do it for us!

Worship is so much more than we often allow it to be.

### DEFINING WORSHIP

From the analogy of a jazz band playing for a crowd, I want to emphasize that worship is dynamic and highly interactive. At its core, worship is built on our interaction with God and what God is doing in our lives. This dynamic, interactive experience we call worship can be simply defined in this way:

**Worship is the spiritual practice of responding to God's grace.**

While it is simple, it is also expansive and rich with significance. Let's look more closely at a few words in this definition to appreciate what it is offering us.

#### *Responding*

The definition of worship is wide-ranging because we can respond to God in so many and such various ways. We can respond with awe, praise, prayer, gratitude, contrition, glorification, celebration, petition, confession, singing, reading, exhortation, and Communion, just to name a few.

There are as many ways to worship as there are ways for the heart to express itself to God. This is not a point to be overlooked. We must break down the walls we have placed around worship so that it might surface at any moment in our lives. The reason worship can surface at any moment in our lives leads us to the richness of this definition.

*... to God's grace*

If worship is the spiritual practice of responding to God's grace, then the assumption is that God's grace is present. God's grace is present to us as unmerited forgiveness as well as action in our lives and our world.

Worship does not begin with us but instead begins with God's action and results in our response. While we may agree conceptually with the idea that God is active in our lives and in our world, seeing God's activity on a practical level can be challenging because we aren't sure what it looks like. Graciously, Jesus revealed God's action in a tangible and beautiful way.

Jesus, as the incarnation of God, allows us to witness what God desires and see how God acts in the world. Therefore, everything Jesus does helps us understand how God is acting in our lives and the world today. Jesus reveals a God who loves humanity. Because of that love, God is committed to taking any action required to be in relationship with us and cares enough about

us to seek our healing, liberation, and formation. And our healing, liberation, and formation are the result of Jesus' tangible actions. Let's just spell out some of them:

- Jesus welcomed people who had been excluded.
- Jesus listened to the voiceless.
- Jesus healed the hurting.
- Jesus forgave sinners.
- Jesus guided seekers.
- Jesus fed the hungry.
- Jesus challenged those who held onto power.

There is nothing surprising or radical about this list. But it is easy to miss two important keys. First, every sentence involves Jesus' action. Every verb in those sentences is describing God's action. *Welcomed, listened, healed, forgave, guided, fed,* and *challenged* are words for what Jesus did.

And the second important key is that the Spirit of Christ is still seeking to do those things in our lives today. So I would encourage you to consider where you are on this list:

- Jesus desires to welcome you.
- Jesus longs to listen to you.

- Jesus wants to heal you.
- Jesus fully forgives you.
- Jesus gladly guides you.
- Jesus yearns to feed you.
- Jesus lovingly challenges you.

We can take hold of these actions, allowing them to sink into our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies. In our own lives, when the stranger is welcomed, we are witnessing God's grace at work. When people listen deeply to one another, we are seeing God at work. When we experience restoration, it is God moving in our lives. When we are embraced by forgiveness, it is God's action in our hearts.

When we discover wisdom for how we are to live, this is God's love at work. When we find abundance in a place known for scarcity, it is God's kingdom breaking into our world. When we find our own beliefs and barriers and false narratives being challenged, we are bumping into God's truth. And when our wounded souls become the cavern in which the song of God's love joyously echoes, we are worshiping.

### *A Spiritual Practice*

Finally, our definition for *worship* points out that it is a spiritual practice. This phrase is popular now, but with popularity comes ambiguity,

so let's be clear about it. To begin with, the practice itself is not spiritual—you are! What makes any activity spiritual is when you do it with your “heart and mind” set on Christ (Colossians 3). By doing spiritual practices, we are not becoming more spiritual, but we are becoming more aware of our spirituality.

The spiritual practices are practices because they are something we can choose to do. Practice means we don't always do it well, but we can keep practicing at it. And it means it shapes our souls.

The goal is not to practice the spiritual practices; the goal is to be transformed in Christ. Taking on spiritual practices is one way of opening ourselves to transformation. For it is through the spiritual practices that the Holy Spirit can help transform the way we see God, ourselves, our neighbors, and our world.

With time, we come to see all of these things the same way Christ sees them, and therefore it becomes increasingly possible to live our lives in a way that is parallel to the life of Jesus as we see it in the gospels. This means we can speak the truth in love, engage in conflict, bring healing, love our enemies, live without a need to be noticed for our righteousness, and give our lives for others.

## PUNY WORSHIP

When we have a clearer understanding of what worship is, it shines a light on the shadowy

half-truths we often believe about worship, and this is valuable. Of all the spiritual practices, worship may be the most familiar and therefore the most overlooked.

Many Christians (myself included) began attending weekly worship before we could walk. Because of this great familiarity, we need to look more closely at our ideas about worship and flesh out possible gaps. When our understanding of worship has false understandings or half-truths, it leads to a puny understanding of worship that can actually be harmful to our souls and to our community of faith. What are some of these half-truths and false beliefs that affect our understanding of worship?

*Half-Truth: Worship and Church Are Synonyms*

First, we can find a more robust understanding of worship by looking more closely at the words *worship* and *church*. For most of the American Christians I have known, worship and church are used interchangeably. This is acceptable enough as a shorthand, but we need to be intentional and periodically clarify that both of these words mean much more.

While we certainly do go to the church building during the week for community worship, we are missing out if we think church is just a building. A church is a group of two or three people gathered in Jesus' name. This is a fact worth savoring.

When we meet with a friend to share our struggles and to seek God's guidance—we are being church. When we travel with a group of friends to a place where disaster has struck and we help rebuild to express God's care—we are being church.

When we attend a meeting with others in order to make decisions about the care of function of the church building—we are being church. And when we sit with one or two other people in someone's living room to sing a song, share a meal, and offer our lives to God—we are being church, and we are worshipping corporately.

*Half-Truth: Worship Is Specifically Communal*

More often than we realize, we are being the church, and sometimes those gatherings are worship. But this leads us to our second half-truth. This half-truth states, "Worship is something that can only be done with others." As I've named above, we can and do worship with others, but if this is the only way we consider worship, we are missing out. The rest of the truth is that we can worship in many ways and in many places, including alone.

Richard Foster offers this insightful teaching as he explores steps into worship. "Have many different experiences of worship. Worship God when you are alone. Have home groups not just for Bible study, but for the very experience of worship itself. Gather little groups of two and three

and learn to offer up a sacrifice of praise. Many things can happen in smaller gatherings that, just by sheer size, cannot happen in the larger experience. All of these little experiences of worship will empower and impact the larger Sunday gatherings.”<sup>1</sup> What an amazing insight!

For over two decades, my wife, Catherine, and I have spent time each morning doing a morning devotion. It has changed and evolved from simply reading Scripture and praying for others, to using a common prayer book, to including Taize music. But it wasn’t until I read the quote above from Richard Foster that I realized this daily practice helped us to be more prepared each Sunday when we showed up for congregational worship.

In the next chapters, we will explore how such a daily practice also helps us prepare for the world we inhabit.

#### Active Application

Take notice of the ways you use the words *worship* and *church*. Do not judge yourself for the way you use these words. What does your use of these terms teach or show you?

#### *Half-Truth: Worship Is a Performance, and I Am the Audience*

If you are like me, you know how tempting it is to sit in worship on Sunday morning, feeling as if you are there to be entertained, engaged, and

educated. The performers are up front to entertain and to educate us, the audience. When we enter worship with this attitude, we often leave disappointed by various aspects of the service: The preacher seemed unprepared, the accompanist played our favorite hymn too fast, the soloist was off-key, the computer person couldn't advance the slides fast enough to keep up with the reading, and on and on.

And, if you are like me, you also have a deep sense that worship is more than a performance and more than being entertained. In fact, can we really say "Worship is a performance, and I am the audience" is a half-truth, or is it completely wrong?

I would suggest that there is in fact truth to the statement "Worship is a performance, and we are the audience." When worship involves more than one person, someone has to lead. And often that person needs to prepare in some way, whether it is selecting the songs that will be sung, preparing a sermon, practicing an instrument, or preparing the slides. And when they share what they have prepared, it is a performance.

And as for the congregants as an audience, there is also an element of truth here. The word *audience* actually has roots in the Latin word *audire*, which means "hear."<sup>2</sup> An audience is a group that hears and grasps what is shared. In this sense, we can say Christians who have

gathered together for worship are listening to what is shared.

Things go awry, however, when we allow ourselves to be the end-point of the performance. Instead of being the end-point, we are invited to receive the performance and then lift it up and pass it on to God with our own thanks and praise. In many ways, this is easier when the performance is amazing.

I have been at secular concerts listening to professional musicians and felt close to God and moved to a place of gratitude toward God. This in spite of the fact that the performance was in no way framed as a worship service. Through the power of their abilities, the artist turned me toward a God who creates beauty, reveals truth, and fosters goodness.

But what about the moments in worship when the performer is not that good? Here is when our presence as an audience must be more like the crowd at the jazz club I described at the beginning of the chapter.

We have the opportunity to call forth the best in the person who is leading by first surrounding them with prayer, then receiving their offering through attentive listening. And then, in whatever way is appropriate for our congregation, we lift up what is being offered to God. This could be as subtle as leaning forward and nodding our head in affirmation of their offering, or it could

include lifting our hands in praise or shouting “Amen!” Whatever the case, we join our worship with the leader’s worship and place it before the Trinity, who delights in the messy artwork of their beloved children.

#### Active Application

Notice if there are any “messy” parts of worship that annoy you. Can you offer these elements mercy and forgiveness? If so, how does it change your experience of worship?

#### *Fully False: Worship Has to Have [Fill in the Blank]*

What elements of worship do you consider “essential”? Hymns, choruses, a sermon, an organ, a guitar, a choir, a bulletin, a projector, an offering? Are these elements what make a worship service?

There are two aspects to this statement we need to briefly identify. The first is the human tendency to decide that our favorite part of worship is the essential part of worship; and therefore if worship doesn’t include that, it’s not real worship. Because the goal of this book is to broaden and deepen our understanding of worship so it leads to a life lived in service to God, we need to address this.

I find the reason many people are attached to specific elements of worship is because they have lived through a church debate about

contemporary vs. traditional worship. Rather than being a discerning conversation where the Spirit was given space to lead, it turned into a political rodeo, with sides being chosen and winners and losers being identified.

While this is not a universal occurrence, it is sadly not uncommon either. And if you are a person who has been hurt by one of these events, I want you to know your pain, frustration, and disappointment are real. I don't want to glaze over them lightly.

When we discuss worship, we need to be aware of this possible wound. We need to acknowledge the pain that some people carry around this topic. The goal here of bringing up this possible wound is simply to become aware of it. If we don't, the pain of a past decision or argument may be lurking in the background and impacting the way you worship.

Whether you are worshiping with the congregation or worshiping alone, pain or resentment may be shaping your worship. It may be freeing to simply name this and allow it to be part of the conversation as you move through the topics of this book.

There is a second reason I have listed this "false" statement here. Worship is much more than just the components of instruments, projectors, and carpet. When a congregation of people come together to worship God, their worship will

include some or even all of the elements I have listed above. However, it is not those pieces that make worship true worship. Throughout the rest of this book, we will be talking about worship as a spiritual practice. It happens in many settings and in many ways. It includes, but is not limited to, congregational worship with the elements I have listed above.

#### Active Application

Create a list of elements that you feel are “essential” to worship. Why do you include these components on your list?

#### *Fully False: Worship Is Something I Do to Get God to Like Me or to Earn God's Favor/Salvation*

Any conversation about spiritual practices needs to address this lie. Many people struggle to understand how spiritual practices fit into our lives. Many of us have grown up being warned that we cannot earn salvation from God, which is a great warning to keep in mind. We cannot earn salvation.

But this produces a question: If salvation cannot be earned, then why should anyone do the spiritual practices? The way we answer this question and undo the false statement above is by understanding what spiritual practices actually do and how worship fits into the category of spiritual practice.

First of all, God loves you—period. Full stop. God loved you before you deserved it (“But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us” [Romans 5:8]), and God loves you now. You have been given this love as a gift, whether you receive it and enjoy it or not.

You also can’t do anything to break God’s love. Even if you reject God in every imaginable way, God’s love for you will remain. Just as the father of the prodigal son was always watching for the possible return of the younger son (Luke 15:20), so too God’s love will always be watching for the possible return of anyone who has rejected God.

So, in other words, there is nothing to be earned. However, there is much to be experienced. There are many ways we could name what it is we can experience. We can experience God’s love, we can experience life in the kingdom of God, and we can experience God’s grace.

The Book of Discipline defines grace as “the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> Through spiritual practices such as worship, we intentionally seek God out with a desire to experience God’s action in the world and also to collaborate with God’s action in the world.

Don’t let this get too abstract in your mind. Through Christ, we have been invited to experience a relationship with the God who is love. This means we can move through each moment

of each day in companionship with God. Through the ever-present Spirit, we can seek God's wisdom as we make decisions, we can seek Christ's creativity as we face challenges, we can seek the Spirit's comfort as we face insecurity. It is an entirely different way to move through life. And we know what it looks like because that is how Jesus moved through life, so we can see it in the Gospels.

By grace, we experience God's love at various moments and in various ways. Sometimes it comes in small ways such as a moment of joy as we watch the sunrise. At other times, it can be a major turning point, as when we hit rock-bottom because of an addiction.

And in the Christian tradition, we have practices that place us before God so that God might work in and through us. Worship is one such practice. When we worship God, we are not earning favor, but we are placing ourselves in a position to be in relationship with God.

#### Active Application

What have you been taught about spiritual practices and grace? Do you hold spiritual practices at a distance for fear of violating God's grace? Do you engage in spiritual practices like a superstitious activity, hoping God will give you what you want if you do them?

## HEARING GOD'S SONG OF GRACE

Now that we've defined *worship* and dispelled a few false ideas about worship, let's look at stories that illustrate what we have named. The Bible gives us many stories of people practicing worship. God moved in their lives in a powerful way, and naturally they responded with praise and thanks. Let's look closely at two stories from the Bible and see what we can learn.

### *Jacob's Ladder: Stairway to Heaven*

Genesis 27 shows a dysfunctional family on full display. It tells us the story of how Isaac's wife, Rebekah, coached the younger son, Jacob, to steal the blessing of the elder son, Esau, by lying to Isaac and pretending to be Esau. When Esau found out the blessing had been stolen, he was so enraged that the only way he could console himself was to ponder how he would kill Jacob.

The only thing keeping Jacob alive was that Esau was going to wait until their father, Isaac, had died; then he would kill Jacob. In an effort to keep Jacob alive, Rebekah made up a reason that he should leave: He needed to find a wife. Rebekah went to Isaac and explained that the local women were intolerable for her and that Jacob should find a wife in the land Rebekah came from. Isaac obliged and sent Jacob to Rebekah's brother, Laban. It is in the midst of this messy story that we read:

Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran. He reached a certain place and spent the night there. When the sun had set, he took one of the stones at that place and put it near his head. Then he lay down there. He dreamed and saw a raised staircase, its foundation on earth and its top touching the sky, and God's messengers were ascending and descending on it. Suddenly the LORD was standing on it and saying, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth; you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants. I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you." When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself, The LORD is definitely in this place, but I didn't know it. He was terrified and thought, This sacred place is awesome. It's none other than God's house and the entrance to heaven. After Jacob got up early in the morning, he

took the stone that he had put near his head, set it up as a sacred pillar, and poured oil on the top of it. He named that sacred place Bethel, though Luz was the city's original name. (Genesis 28:10-19)

In this one story, we can see so many important truths illustrated. First, we see grace at work. Jacob had not done anything to deserve the promise God was speaking into his life. Jacob wasn't religious or devout. Up to this point, what we've seen of Jacob is that he was primarily concerned with himself.

We also see that God is active. It was God at work in Jacob's world, with angels ascending and descending on the ladder to heaven. God also made an action-packed promise to Jacob. God said, "I will *give* you . . . [this] land," "I am *with* you now, I will protect you everywhere you go and I will *bring you back* to this land. I will *not leave* you until I have *done everything that I have promised* you" (verses 13, 15, bold and italics added).

Jacob awakened with worship on his lips. He marveled at the place where he had laid his head and engaged in worship by turning his pillow into a pillar and blessing it with oil as a marker of what God had done. So, on a basic level, we see that this story illustrates what worship is: God acted, Jacob responded.

### *The Woman of Great Love*

We also see worship enacted in the New Testament, especially around forgiveness. Jesus embodied God's gracious forgiveness in a way that deeply touched people. And perhaps no story illustrates forgiveness and worship more powerfully than the story of a woman who showed up at Simon the Pharisee's house to express her deep gratitude to Jesus. The story occurs in Luke 7:36-50.

One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him. After he entered the Pharisee's home, he took his place at the table. Meanwhile, a woman from the city, a sinner, discovered that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee's house. She brought perfumed oil in a vase made of alabaster. Standing behind him at his feet and crying, she began to wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured the oil on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw what was happening, he said to himself, *If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner.*

Jesus replied, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

"Teacher, speak," he said.

"A certain lender had two debtors. One owed enough money to pay five hundred people for a day's work. The other owed enough money for

fifty. When they couldn't pay, the lender forgave the debts of them both. Which of them will love him more?"

Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the largest debt canceled."

Jesus said, "You have judged correctly."

Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your home, you didn't give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't greet me with a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in. You didn't anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet. This is why I tell you that her many sins have been forgiven; so she has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little loves little."

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

The other table guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this person that even forgives sins?"

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

This woman knew that God's action toward her was an astonishing gift. She knew she had been forgiven of much, and that awareness fueled her outlandish expression of worship. She began with tears, which allowed her to wash Jesus' feet. Then she dried his feet with her hair. Then she kissed Jesus' feet before she anointed them with

ointment. Her immense expression of love came from her profound sense of forgiveness. God acted through the person of Jesus; the woman responded with tears of gratitude. That's worship!

#### GOD'S ACTION: FUEL FOR WORSHIP

Now, let's return to the analogy of a jazz band backing up a soloist as he or she improvises. In our analogy, God is the soloist, and we are the back-up musicians playing off of God's solo. In the two biblical stories we've just looked at, we can see that Jacob and the woman who washed Jesus feet are doing exactly that. Neither of these stories take place in a planned worship service. They are improvised moments that resulted from joining in with what God was doing.

If God's action is the fuel for worship, then the health and vibrancy of our worship will depend on how closely we are looking for God's grace in our lives. To be listening for God's improvised solo in our life, we must keep tuning our ear for that song. We must keep turning our attention toward God. We can call this a "Godward life."

The Godward life begins with the discovery that God is active in our world and wants to include us in that activity, with our specific gifts. We seek to discover how God's action is breaking into every corner of our lives and the world. We can name this the Godward life because we are repeatedly turning back toward God. This is the practice of the Godward life: turning back toward

God moment by moment, day by day, throughout life.

We often forget to turn Godward in our living, but we can practice it, just like we can practice anything else. If I want to run a marathon, I don't go out on the first day and run 26 miles. I start by running two miles, and I build up to 26 over many months. If I want to learn to play guitar, I don't start by playing an Eric Clapton solo. I start by learning individual chords. If I want to live the Godward life, I don't start by loving my enemies. I start by helping my friendly neighbors assemble their new grill. Eventually, we build up to loving our enemies—seriously.

Living a Godward life is simple but certainly not easy. It is difficult because God's guidance and action are not always obvious. There are seasons when we must wait for God's timing, and that can feel frustrating. There are also times when injustice, pain, suffering, and sin place a cloak over God's action.

When we are suffering, it is invaluable to know God is not inflicting suffering upon us. Instead, Jesus stands beside us in our suffering, for he understands exactly what it means to bear injustice, pain, suffering, and sin. He grieves with us. He understands our pain and doubt. And our hope is this: God is able to work through all these things to bring redemption and wholeness. But still, when the cloak of suffering is covering God's work, we struggle to believe God is active.

The Godward life can sound theological and abstract. But in fact, when we see someone else living it, we can't miss it. For me, one person who lived the Godward life was Judy.

When I first got to know Judy, she had just lost her home and was living in her car. She had several health issues, but her mind was brilliant and sharp. One evening, she shared with a few of us how she had been feeling so discouraged by her living situation. She was turning this over in her mind when she recalled a line from a song: "Count your blessings, name them one by one," so she began to think about each item she still possessed in her car.

As each item came to mind, Judy found herself becoming thankful for the item, the person who gave it to her, or what it provided to her. She was moved to gratitude and praise. And, thankfully, it wasn't too long before she was able to find a home.

### *A Powerful and Beautiful Picture*

I specifically remember a friend of mine who was in the room when Judy told us about her many blessings. My friend was so thunderstruck by Judy's gratitude that she resolved to spend time every week with Judy and her circle of friends. Why was she so motivated? Because a person who is deeply rooted in the Godward life is inspiring to us.

If we have a clear picture of the Godward life in our minds, then it will be an exciting and

energizing life to imagine. Being energized is helpful to us because it will motivate us to seek first the kingdom of God.

If our picture of the Godward life is one where we have to give up all of our favorite things and be miserable to make God like us, then we will run out of energy pretty quickly. We'll stop training to live this type of life. But if we are excited by the image of this life of deep intimacy and friendship with God, then we will have the motivation necessary to devote time and energy to what God is inviting us to discover.

In our hurried and scurried lives, many of us struggle to prioritize our life with God. If you have ever committed to praying more, reading Scripture more, or having more worship time and then promptly proceeded not to do that very thing, please don't beat yourself up about it. Instead, seek out a more powerful and compelling vision. Feeling guilty can be a helpful indicator that we are headed in the wrong direction, but it is a poor motivator.

### *The Best Life Possible*

The fact is that living a Godward life that flows into worship is the most amazing life we could ever possibly live. Living a life where we can have the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer moving through each moment of each day with us is the greatest gift we could receive. Knowing that when we face any challenge we can turn and

have a conversation with God about our struggles is astonishing.

Turning toward God means we can bring God's love and peace and healing into every relationship we have. It starts with the people we already care about, bringing greater and greater love into our relationships with them.

As Mother Teresa would say, we can do small gestures with great love. Yet the Godward life doesn't stop there. It expands to impact our relationships with the people in our lives who are difficult to love because of what they have suffered or mistakes they have made. God's guidance and love makes it possible for us to love them.

The Godward life also leads us into exciting and joyful discoveries about ourselves and our world. Learning how to follow God's leading could impact your work—how you work or where you work.

The Godward life could impact where we live. You might feel led to relocate to a place that the world has chosen to ignore. Or you might stay right where you are and intentionally foster love for your neighbors and love for where you live. The Godward life might guide you to creating art, poetry, music, or film. The Godward life might stir your heart to start a non-profit around something you care deeply about, or it might guide you to enter into a specific ministry. The joyous possibilities are endless!

*Worship and the Godward Life*

Keep in mind, the fruit of this Godward life is worship. As we seek God's guidance and action in our lives and the world, we will discover it. And when we see what God is up to, we will naturally want to praise God.

Sometimes we will respond with awe, as Jacob did after his dream. Sometimes we will respond with tears of joy, as did the woman who washed Jesus' feet. Sometimes we will respond with gratitude, as Judy did after recounting what God had given her. Our worship can cover the full range of human emotion and experience because God is active in the full range of human emotion and experience.

**CONCLUSION**

I grew up with a fairly weak and watery understanding of jazz. Then, in my 30s, I was able to experience (emphasis: experience) jazz in New Orleans. It completely changed my understanding of the music and the culture surrounding jazz.

How many of us are living with a weak and watery understanding of worship? I suspect many of us are! But it doesn't have to stay this way. The Spirit beckons us to drop our false understandings of worship and step into the Godward life that can only result in worship.

Individually and with others, we can pursue this Godward and worshipful life. Small steps and simple practices can help us immensely.

### Active Applications

This chapter is packed with several big ideas that are foundational to our understanding of worship and the Godward life. However, we don't discover worship just by reading about it. We also discover a worshipful life by living it. We discover this life by practicing and experimenting. Below are a few practices to help you live into the Godward life more fully. They are suggestions, not assignments. The Godward life is a dynamic relationship with God, not a checklist of tasks. Prayerfully look over this list for the practice that catches your attention or stirs your curiosity. Use it as a starting place to discover your ability to fully experience worship.

### *Entering the Story*

The primary gospel passage of this chapter was Luke 7:36-50, the story of the woman washing Jesus' feet. To explore your own feelings about the Godward life and worship, you can prayerfully read this story and allow yourself to be part of it.

To begin, invite the Holy Spirit to open your heart so that God might speak to you through this passage. After the prayer, read the passage twice to get acquainted with the story. Then read the passage a third time, as any character in the story. You might be Simon the Pharisee, you might be the woman, you might be an unnamed observer.

Read the passage slowly and with pauses. During the pauses, picture the story in your mind. As you witness this act of adoration and worship, allow whatever feelings (pleasant or unpleasant), to rise to the surface. Invite Jesus to look into your heart and talk with you about what he finds there.

When you have finished this prayer time, take a few minutes to write down your reflections on the experience. Know that even if the prayer experience seems fruitless, God will be able to work through it. By reflecting on the experience, you have the opportunity to gain insight into God's work in your life.

### *Turning Godward (Prayer of Examen)*

One of the simplest and most valuable ways we can cultivate the Godward life is by spending time each day noticing where God seemed present and where God appeared to be absent. This exercise is traditionally known as a prayer of examen.<sup>4</sup>

We trust that God desires to lead us through the small moments in our lives, as well as the "burning bush" moments. The prayer of examen gives us a chance to "dust for fingerprints" and see where God is working in our lives. We know that God has been at work in our lives when we experience fullness of life, healing, gratitude, and/or joy. Here is one way to practice this exercise:

The prayer of examen is generally done once a day (either at the end of the day or at the beginning).

Begin by lighting a candle and having a moment of silence, allowing yourself to remember that God is active and present in your life. Then, reflecting on the previous 24 hours (if you are doing this exercise daily), ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in answering these two questions:

- For what moment am I most thankful?
- For what moment am I least thankful?

As you answer each question, do not filter your thoughts. Allow yourself to be honest and open with God. As we do this practice, we are reminding ourselves that even the smallest moments of joy or gratitude are gracious gifts from a God who loves us. The moments we are thankful for are invitations, helping us know what direction God is leading us. And in the same way, the moments we are least thankful for can sometimes help us discover areas of our lives where we need to make changes.

Keep a journal of your answers. You need not write much in the journal; just a word or phrase will do. Over time, look back over your journal for any patterns forming that help you in knowing how best to cooperate with God.

### *Describe Your Godward Life*

God is inviting you into an abundant and eternal type of life. One of the greatest ways to

motivate ourselves for this Godward life is to describe what it might look like. (I say “might” because we can’t know exactly what our life in Christ will look like, but that doesn’t mean we can’t move in that direction and learn as we go.)

For this exercise, write or draw an illustration that depicts what your life would look like if you lived moment-by-moment in dialogue with God. To begin, find a journal or a blank sheet of paper. Spend a few moments in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to guide your imagining.

Then begin writing or drawing what your Godward life might look like. You might describe one specific day, you might describe what is happening inside you as you move through a normal day, or you might describe the type of character you develop as a result of following Jesus closely.

The goal of this exercise is to be inspired and energized to take action.

*Reflection Questions*

1. The opening story helps create an analogy between a jazz band and a worshipful life. How does this analogy challenge and/or inspire your understanding of a worshipful life?
2. When you think of Jacob awaking from his dream and the woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears, what words would you use to describe their worship? Reflect on a time you engaged in worship in a way that was similar to either Jacob or the woman.
3. What do you find helpful about the author's definition of worship? What would you add to or take away from that definition (if anything)?
4. Which half-truth or fully false belief about worship do you most struggle to undo? Is there a half-truth you would add to the author's list?
5. When have you experienced worship outside a church building? How did that experience impact you?
6. Can you think of someone you have known personally who lived a Godward life? What was it about them that made you think so?

- <sup>1</sup>) From *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, by Richard Foster (HarperOne, 1978); page 171.
- <sup>2</sup>) From [etymonline.com/word/audience](https://www.etymonline.com/word/audience) (July 14, 2018).
- <sup>3</sup>) From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2012, ¶102.
- <sup>4</sup>) For a more in-depth exploration of the prayer of examen, I highly recommend *Sleeping With Bread*, by Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant-Linn, and Dennis Linn.