

10.6.2024 Sermon

Praise & Worship | John 4:24

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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Joan, I'm not going to make you play behind me for an hour because I care for you. For those of you who weren't here last week, Joan played all through Sandra's sermon, but it was lovely. It was great. I'm just teasing. Joan had to call in sick the next day because she was exhausted, but it was fine. It worked out great. Yeah, her hands were paralyzed, but it was fine. No, it was beautiful. I'm just messing with you. Sandra always talks about me in her sermon, so, you know.

But we are starting a series that has been going for a couple of weeks, and I'm calling it the gym. Thank you, Pastor James. He actually had this epiphany a few months ago, and he was talking about bringing this into 2025. I just thought it was brilliant. It's changing the image of the church from a hospital to a gym.

And when you think about a hospital, a hospital is someplace you go to get well. It's a very passive place. So, it's a place you go when you're sick, and professionals take care of you. You often go there, and you lay in a bed, and let's say you have to go to physical therapy or get a test. You move from your bed to a wheelchair, and somebody pushes you. When you eat, somebody brings you food. They come take your blood pressure. You lay in bed, you move your thumb for the clicker on the television. Somebody comes in, takes your temperature, helps you get dressed. If you need something, you push the little buzzer. A nurse comes in, you know? They wheel you around.

A gym, however, is a place that you have to go to. A gym is a place that if you want to gain muscle and get healthy, you actually have to get in your car and go. You have to make yourself work out. You have to find a machine. You have to put the weights on it. You have to find your coach. Your coach does not do the work for you. Your coach tells you the work that you must do. Your coach stands there and goes, "Yeah, do 10 more." Sometimes you curse

your coach. Sometimes you don't like your coach, and you are the one that has to implement the tools in order to stay healthy.

If you don't go to the gym, we all know that your fat cells come back faster than the muscle goes on. Not only that, but your fat cells accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and refuse to leave. Exactly. They never die. They have eternal life. Your fat cells, right?

So, going to the gym takes effort. Going to the gym is something that we have to actively do. But we have entered the church more like a hospital, and we've said it. We said we're a hospital. And when he said, when Pastor James said that it was like, for me, an epiphany, because when you have the idea of a church being a hospital, then oftentimes it's the leaders that do all the work while the congregants come in and sit and go, "You feed me. You serve me. You." And we lose that reciprocal coming together, and all of us working together, it becomes more like "you do it. I come in. You serve me. And, by the way, if you don't serve me effectively, and well, I'm going to leave, and I'm going to find a place that does serve me effectively well," as opposed to "I need to come here and work on my spiritual muscles, my spiritual strength, and do what I need to grow spiritually." It's a great image. Thank you, Pastor James.

So, in our new series, we're going to be talking about the gym, and we're going to be talking about the tools that we have as Christians, and the tools that we know work and are beneficial for our spiritual growth. So, the one that we're starting with is praise and worship, but there's also prayer, there's also community. There's also quiet times, there's also service, there's also giving. There's all kinds of different subjects that we have that are the elementary truths of God's word that are the same as the elementary activities that we employ at the gym. So, this is kind of where we're heading to so entering into praise and worship.

So, we all have an idea of what praise and worship is, and thank you to everybody that filled out the survey, because it was so interesting. And I have to tell you, I have been a believer for 41 years, and I've been in leadership in one way or another for about 38 and I've been studying the Bible for that whole time, and I had so many epiphanies from your surveys, and I recognized my own paradigms, and I recognized my own narrow idea of praise and worship, and I was kind of surprised talk about teaching an old dog new tricks. Did I just call myself a dog? It's kind of odd, but anyway, but here are some of the things that I that you all wrote. And, P.S., by the way, I have no idea who wrote these, so as I read them, I don't know who you are, so don't like, you know, get all embarrassed and things and go, "she knows," because I don't. And second, I love the answers, so thank you for being honest.

I'm not going to get to all of them. I'm not reading all of them, but they're just some of them that that just stuck out to me and that were so interesting. So, one of them, and I'm just going to

read little parts of each one. So, what does praise and worship mean to you? It's my sanctuary. What does praise and worship mean to you? Moments when my life aligns with God's image of me.

Or what aspect of worship do you enjoy most, experiencing God's presence in tangible ways. What aspect of worship do you enjoy least, loud, intense singing, feeling pressured to come to the altar for prayer. I love that answer, because in my brain, when I'm asking people to come up, it's like burp, right? It doesn't it doesn't feel like pressure. But to people that are sitting out there, it might feel like pressure. So that's a valid answer.

I love recognizing that on a scale of zero to ten, how much do you receive something from praise and worship five. So what aspect of worship do you enjoy the least? Since I'm not artistic, I probably least appreciate creative art. What aspect of worship do you enjoy least I don't like when music in church is the only thing referred to as worship, right? So that started the little tweak in my head, because worship for me has always surrounded music or art, right? Those two made sense to me, those two mediums. And then I was like, Well, that's true. One. What is worship? But we'll get there.

I love this. If the person had nothing but the Bible to tell them what worship is and how to do it, what do you think it would look or sound like, music or artistry of any kind, or grilling meats? I asked Tony, was this you or caring for orphans and widows or meeting with other Christians for a meal? Yes, yes. See, I read that and I started to go, yes, it's broader than we think, right?

Least the open weeping and ugly crying, was that the person or is watching us do that. I don't know which one. So, when do you practice or engage with worship consciously? Not very often, to be honest, which I think is many of us. So what aspect of worship do you enjoy least? It can be hard to connect to music and singing, especially of the same words again and again. On a scale of zero to 10, how much do you receive something from praise and worship? Five. So, what I love about these is the diversity.

And we all live here in this diversity. All of us are a part of this. On a scale of one to 10, how much do you receive something from praise and worship? 10. What aspect of worship do you enjoy? I appreciate the medicine that praise and worship gives me each week. What does praise and worship mean to you? It is transformational for me. It is a space where I strip off the world and enter into a space of love and connection. The singing of songs, the emotional connection, all helps me see the way God does. I offer the purest praise and love I have here, because this is truly me.

Here's my favorite. Okay, it's not my favorite, but it really made me laugh. So here we go. What aspect of worship do you enjoy most? I don't know. Worship is abstract. Most people associate worship with singing songs to and for God, but I believe there's something deeper and more to worship. I just don't know why. Okay, here we go, and then they go on. They go, if a person had nothing but the Bible, and then they go, well, Psalms are a good place. There was lots of singing. But I also think worship happens when you're praying and begging God to help you, like David used to pray, but not necessarily on your knees, but praying wherever you are, acknowledging that God is greater, crying out to Him. I think I'm figuring out this worship thing as I write.

And then, what principles or truths do you believe? Just trusting and believing God, I guess. I don't know. Ask Miss Cindy, she knows everything. You made the survey, not ask pastor Tracy or Pastor James. Ask Miss Cindy, there you go, right there. So, the Bible mentions praise over 500 times. Why do I say that? Because what this tells us is it's an important part of our spiritual life. So, the 1500 years from the time of Abraham to the time of Ezra, there were so many changes in the form of worship in ancient Israel, so many changes. What does this tell us? What this means is that it's fluid. What this means is that it changes. What this means is that worship is meant to change. It's not stagnant, and it's going to look different. And it's going to look different depending on your culture. It's going to look different depending on the church you go to, it's going to look different. And what that tells us is that there is no right way, and there is no wrong way. It is a matter of the heart.

So, we see Abraham building altars, offering sacrifices. Moses had the tabernacle that served as a portable sanctuary. Solomon built a lavish temple. There are different ways. There are different places.

Now, what's interesting is ancient Israel had a much broader concept of worship. They offered worship in the home. They offered it in the temple several times a day. They offered it on Sabbath. They offered at festivals. Worship was about the family coming together. Worship was about the community coming together. Worship was about the individual coming together. Worship was about the whole nation coming together, and it was very much woven into their national identity, and it was very much woven into the very fabric of their lives.

So, worship in Jewish culture, let me just say a couple of things. They considered circumcision an act of worship. They considered eating meals together and prayer before the meals an act of worship. They considered, of course, the sacrificial system an act of worship. They considered the celebration of festivals an act of worship. They considered, of course, praise and worship, the instruments and singing, and all of that, an act of worship. They considered offering their services and skills to the community. Building of the temple, serving in the synagogues, an act of worship.

They considered reading what was known at that time of Scripture, prophets, wisdom, literature, the Torah, as an act of worship. They considered the dancing, the playing instruments, the singing, as an act of worship. And after the destruction of the temple, going to temple was an act of worship, and then going to the synagogue was an act of worship.

So, praise and worship was a part of the holistic image of their whole life. It wasn't just one part. I think oftentimes, we collapse worship to going to church on Sunday, and we collapse it into that moment. We collapse it even further into the moment when we're singing. I have to be honest, I was kind of there, or the moment when I'm at home and I'm singing songs with praise and worship. Even though I recognize that the arts are part of praise and worship, it was still a little outside of my purview, compared to singing, playing instruments, and that aspect of it. I didn't even recognize my own paradigm or my own prejudice. I just kind of had it in there, and until I was looking at the surveys and really studying praise and worship, I thought, "Wow, I'm looking at my own bias here." I have what I call an embedded theology that I've carried for 41 years that I didn't even really recognize.

So, what is it? I think there's an aspect and an invitation from God that praise and worship surrounds the holistic concept of shalom, and that's holistic. The very Jewish concept of Shalom is about wholeness, completeness, soundness, health, safety, and prosperity. It comes with this implication of permanence and maintaining a perspective of life.

There is an invitation to a bigger, broader perspective of life that God invites us into with praise and worship, beyond what we have collapsed it into. I hope we are able to grasp this, because I think there's something very special here. What is it, why is it, what is the purpose of it, and does God have an ego? Is it that God is like Zeus, standing upon the throne with arms wide open, demanding that we worship? If that's the case, then God would have an ego, but that doesn't sit well, so I'll get to that in a minute. How each of us answers these questions about what worship really is makes a difference in how we approach that holistic image of life, of God, of church services, and how we live our lives as believers.

The two verses that really stuck out to me were John 4:24, "God is Spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." There is a part here that God is inviting us into a deeper way of being. And Romans 12:1, "Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." This tells me that God is inviting us into a different way of being and into a deeper way of being with our spirit, soul, and body—that holistic image that God has for us.

Let me tell you a little story of what happened in Italy. You know, Tony and I were in Italy, and my luggage was lost for five days. In my mind, and the story I tell myself, is that I was handling

that really well. I look at my good friend Joan when I say that. Tony, on a scale of one to five, how good was I handling that?

Tony says it too. In my mind, I was, you know, like accepting it and handling it well, that I had no clothes, you know, and we had to go shopping and things to get it. And then when I finally got my luggage, I found that things were stolen out of it. I had clothes stolen, and then I lost my mind, and I like, went like ballistic, right? I went ballistic. You know, somebody's rummaging through my luggage, stealing my shoes. Y'all know I love shoes, right? They stole my shoes. They didn't steal my flip flops. They stole my favorite shoes. And then they stole, like, I pack in cubes. They stole whole cubes. They just took the whole cubes, right? So, I came unglued, and for 24 hours, I was, like, chewing nails, right? And I'm trying, I'm a mental health coach, right? So, I'm implementing every tool I have. They didn't work. It didn't work, right?

So, I am just totally frustrated. It. So I go to bed, I sleep, I wake I don't know if I slept. Maybe I didn't sleep, I don't know. So, I get up the next day, and Tony and my brother-in-law are eating breakfast, and I bash in the door, and I go, I'm gonna take a walk in this godforsaken land. And then I turn around, and I walk out, and I start walking. I go, I'm just telling you in case I get killed, right? So that's right, that's your pastor, spiritual at all times. So, I go walking out, and I'm walking down the lane, dun uh taran taran taran, I'm just so angry, right? But I know I gotta pull it together, right? I'm with other people on the trip. It's not just about me, but I am so angry and as I'm walking down the lane, you know, I'm talking with God, mostly I'm screaming. And, you know, nothing's working and it's got, you know, it's beautiful and sunny. I don't see any. I see nothing. I'm just I see my own self.

And so, I walk, and as I'm walking, I walk down into a neighborhood. We're in a very rural area, and it was farmland, lot of cows, very farmy. But then there's this one little area that had, you know, a little neighborhood by neighborhood. I mean, like, seven houses, and as I'm walking down there, you know, I had, like, the cacophony of dogs. There was a dog there, dog and I walked to the end of this little neighborhood, and I hear something behind me, and I turn around, and it's a dog that's chasing me. I turn around, and I look at the dog, and I'm like, don't mess with me. And the dog stops in his tracks. Its tail goes under, and it looks at me, I swear his eyes got bigger, and it went right, and it literally ran back home, and I'm like, Yeah, right.

So, I turn around, and I go walking back, and I'm like, God, you gotta help me here. Like, help me, because I'm so angry. And then I heard this beautiful, still, small voice, and it said, Tracy, look at the terrain. Look around you at the terrain. So, show the show the terrain. And I don't know if you can see that. Well, can you turn the light off for a minute? Tom, but the terrain is very rocky. Sicily is not that attractive. It kind of helps me understand why angry people come from Sicily or the mafia. It's a very, very rocky, angry terrain, and I look at it, and the Lord just that still small voice, what do you see? And I'm like, a lot of rocks and a lot of desert and a lot

of dead things. And then I heard in my heart, look closer. And I went in the midst of the rocks, there is green and there is growth. And I saw this tree growing up out of the out of that wall, out of that rock wall. And you, I don't know if you can see it, but the tree is cut in half and is hollow, and yet it's blooming. And what I heard the Lord say to me, or that voice that I attribute to the Lord, kind of say to me, was, in the roughest of terrain, beauty can grow in the most difficult of circumstances, grain can come forth in the hardest spaces of disappointment, fruit can be born. And I heard the little voice say, change your perspective. And so, I went, Okay. And so instead of going, I'm so angry, I went, Tracy. See you lost your luggage in Italy. You're in Italy, enjoy it.

And then I just started having gratitude, and I started thinking, and I didn't start going, thank you, God, for to be honest with you, I just went I'm thankful that I have the finances that I can buy clothes that I lost, and that I am on a trip in Italy with Tony and with my sister and brother-in-law, and that it's sunny out and that there is beauty here, and that the dog didn't bite my leg off. And then I just started changing that. And then as I kept walking and I kept thinking about it, I heard that still small whisper and God and God's beautiful way goes. And this is praise and worship. You bring it into your whole life. It's not about church.

It's not about singing. It is about perspective, and it is about bringing God into the nitty gritty of our life. So, worship is not just about this stagnant, narrow church and songs. It is about our attitude towards God, God's attitudes towards us. It is about that kenosis that God has with us, that Philippians talks about, that self-emptying. I'll get to that in a minute. It is about perichoresis, the dance that I talk about so often, that Trinitarian dance, it is about reciprocity, that back and forth.

So, I want to talk about three of these things, of these surveys that really struck out to me, one of them, and the reason is because they're extremes. One of them, this was very long, and they talked about praise and worship, and they talked about that praise and worship means a time where I can center and focus on communing with God with intentions to really eliminate as many distractions so that I can clearly hear what God has for me, exchange what God may need from me to seek God for guidance, for help, for strength, and everything I need to remind myself of all that God is and who God says I am to thank God for all he is, and in return, give back to others.

When do you engage with it? Daily throughout my day. What aspect of worship do you enjoy most? Music speaks to my soul. It soothes me and allows me to relax, and sends prompts by words that I hear through music I enjoy when God reveals God's self to me. On a scale of zero to 10, how much do you receive? Something 10, and this person is just, you can see that it just feeds them. Then you have this one in the middle.

What aspect of worship do you enjoy most? If you mean the churchy kind, not much. I usually read during the musical part of the service. What aspect of worship do you enjoy? Least the insipid lyrics of most songs we sing, they just sound dumb to me. On a scale of zero to 10, how much do you receive? Something one, and then here's this one.

What does praise and worship mean to you? I don't know. I don't know. When do you engage with it? Rarely, if ever. What aspect of worship do you enjoy the least? The vulnerability of humility, gratitude, and selflessness. On a scale of zero to 10, how much do you receive? Five.

What principles or truths do you believe support a person's practice? No clue. I will say something. I will but I will say that something magical does happen when we praise and uplift others in a healthy way we see in front of us, and in science, just how God changes your brain. But from a theological perspective, I don't know. I'm very confused about that, but on the other hand, I do want to know whom I am praising, and I just don't feel safe worshiping right now. Maybe that speaks more. How I feel about myself than God, or maybe it doesn't. I just don't know. It feels off that God would want us to worship him, her, them. If any other being were to have that mindset, it would be considered narcissistic and unhealthy.

What makes it different for God? Isn't God selfless? I hear the religious voice in my head say, "No, we're created for his pleasure." Yeah, okay, that doesn't seem very loving. I'm just confused by the worship thing in general. I don't feel safe to be that vulnerable, nor do I know who am I worshiping at this point, and what is a healthy approach to worship? What is healthy worship? What is a healthy way to admire God? Should we really be on our faces, sobbing and saying we're unworthy and that he's worthy and we want nothing but him? This seems culturally religious and doesn't seem rooted in reality. I could name you 100 things I want besides God, including mac and cheese, zero debt, lane centering on my car, and an unlimited pass to massage Envy, I like that.

Obviously, the love of God runs deeper. So, it's not even a fair comparison. Maybe what I'm saying is, how do I separate out religion from true worship, and what does that mean? Whoever wrote that, if you're hearing and you're here, thank you, because that's honest, and it's very powerful. Because I think that this is what happens with worship. We don't fully understand it. We all have these paradigms of what it is, and we don't fully understand it. Here's mine. I believe that worship is not just one-sided from us to God. I believe it is that dance, and where I get this is Philippians, two, six through eight, that cannot I self-giving love of God, that self-emptying that we find in Philippians, That he did not consider equality as something to be used for his own advantage, But he made himself nothing by taking the very form of a servant that Jesus self-emptied for us, it is that same image that is found in the Trinitarian dance of the parent the child and the Holy Spirit giving Over to one another in self-giving other-centered love, that God is loving community, and God invites us into that same

loving community, and then God invites us to be in that same loving community with one another, and so we all enter into that little dance together.

And I also think of First Corinthians 13, that love is patient, that love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it does not dishonor others. It's not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrong. There is no ego in this love. There is no ego in this self-giving, kenotic self-emptying love that God has for us. So, then that tells me that worship is about something else. It's about that total outpouring, giving out circular dance that we are invited to holistically in every part of our life. With that, imagine what our lives would be.

And I believe that dance is about God and us and us and us and us in God. So, I'm going to tell you two more things, and then I'm going to close. The first story is that I was sitting on the front porch with my granddaughter, and she was just playing with my little bracelets on my arm, and she was just playing with them. She was sitting there, and she kept, you know, for a long time, just playing with them, just doing whatever. And then she would touch my face, and then she would go back to my bracelets, and then she would touch my face, and then she would touch my hair, and then she would touch my face, and then she would go back, and then she would stare at me. And then I would look at her, and then she would touch my face, and so we're doing this little dance.

And then finally, she looks at me and she goes, "I like you, Gigi, right?" And I look at her, my heart melted and I was like, "Oh yeah." And I look at her and I go, "I like you too." Simple. And it's a dance. We were in this beautiful moment of just sweetness. And I could feel her when she was touching my bracelet and touching my face and staring at me, and I could feel her yearning for me and yearning for that connection. And it was so cute because every time I would look at her in her eye, looking at her in the eye was almost too much for her, so she would gently push my face back right. It was like, "Yeah, I don't want you to look at me. I just want to look at you, right?" But it was this beautiful dance.

But here's where it's like, the dance that God invites us to. Even if she never would have said that to me as her grandma, I would still pour out over her because I love her, and I would still be there, and I would still be doing things for her, and I would still be reaching out for her, and I would still be touching her, and I would still be yearning for her, but she was dancing with me. She entered the dance with me.

And so, it was beautiful, and it was lovely. I believe in the depths of my soul that God yearns to dance and enter the dance with us, so that when we are entering into worship, when we are saying walking down a pathway, and God says, change your perspective. And my perspective changes I enter the dance.

Because what I'm saying is, I trust you, God, I trust that you have the path. I'm going to follow you, I'm going to change my perspective. And I did, and everything changed from that moment on. God yearns for us to enter a dance with God. God has this beautiful, perichoretic dance that it's already happening. We are there in Christ. We are already in there. God is with us, but it will take us to go. Yes, I see you, God, and not just in this room, but when we are out there, when we are eating, when we are driving, when we are shopping, when we are doing dishes, when we are with our children, when we're dealing with a difficult boss, when we are dealing with a difficult spouse, when, when the terrain that we're in looks barren and rocky and gross. When life feels hard, there is an invitation to us from God going "Here, I want you to enter the dance right here, and trust me."

I'm going to close with this: even in the natural realm, music and gratitude have actual, statistically studied benefits for us. This tells me that not only is it important relationally—with one another, with God, God with us—but it's also physically beneficial for us. Harvard and Johns Hopkins have done studies; so many places have done studies. I'm just going to read these very fast.

So, this is what music does, and it's not even praise and worship—it's just music. It's heart healthy. It elevates mood, reduces stress, relieves symptoms of depression, and stimulates memories. People who have Alzheimer's can go into music therapy, and their memory comes back through music. It manages pain, eases pain, helps people to eat less, increases workout endurance, and keeps your brain young.

As for gratitude, it opens the doors to more relationships, improves physical health, improves psychological health, enhances empathy, reduces aggression—which certainly rings true from my walk—helps people sleep better (P.S., writing in a gratitude journal improves sleep. Spend just 15 minutes jotting down a few grateful sentiments before bed, and you may sleep better. Hello, gratitude journal for 2024!). Gratitude improves self-esteem and mental strength. These are actual, just natural benefits.

What does that tell you about our God, who formed our hearts, spirits, and minds? God knows what God is doing. We have all the tools that we need for life and godliness—all of them.

So where do I land? I think that praise and worship is about the shalom of our life, about the balance and the holistic nature of our life, and that once again, God is inviting us into something that is greater for us, deeper for us, and more holistic for our lives.