

Worship – Gifts for a King

Why on “worship”? This is another teaching on worship. Every church has a theology of worship, and here’s how to understand what it is.

Suppose a person came to our church that knew nothing about God, nothing about the Bible, nothing about Jesus Christ. This person knew that we met because of our God, and they came to our church to find out what we believed about our God.

This person sat near the back and watched us, because this person wanted to know our God. He or she watched carefully everything that was done in this room, everything people said, how others listened, everything people did, everything that went on.

This person did this because they wanted to know our God, and they wanted to know what it was like to trust this God and obey this God. Suppose they came every Sunday for two months. What do you think that person would know?

Whatever they would learn, *that* would be the theology that comes from our worship.

This is important because our children are doing exactly this. Our church gathering is a big part of what children learn about God. Not the only part, but one big part.

And not just our children, but all of us. All of us are shaped by what happens when we get together to thank God and pray to him and listen to him. So these teachings on worship are so that we will think about what we do here, and how we do it.

Gifts for a king

In the ancient world, if one went to see a king or ruler, one brought a gift for the king. This was good manners; to visit such a person and not bring a gift was bad manners, probably an insult.

When Joseph was in Egypt, and there was a famine everywhere, and Jacob the father sent his sons to Egypt to buy food, he said, “Take along with you some of the best things in the land: some honey, and spices, and myrrh (which is sap from a tree that’s used in perfume), take some pistachio nuts and almonds.”

He did this so his sons would be showing respect to the leader of Egypt (Gen 43:11).

When King Saul got in a black mood because an evil spirit troubled him, his advisors said, “You should get that young David to come and play his harp for you.” So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, David’s father, and said, “Send me your son” (1 Sam 16:19-20).

Jesse loaded up a donkey with bread and wine, and sent also a goat, and sent these all along with David to Saul. He did this because when a person went to see the king, they took gifts with them. It was simple good manners, to show loyalty and appreciation.

Here's what it says about King Solomon. *The whole world wanted to meet with Solomon to hear the wisdom that God had put in his heart. Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift – articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules (1 Kings 10:24-25). Everyone who came brought a gift.*

When Jesus was born and the magi, the wise men, came from the east to worship him, they brought gifts and gave the baby gifts in Bethlehem.

We don't get the meaning of those gifts, but at the time Matthew was written, readers understood exactly what that meant. The whole point of Matthew 1-2 is that Jesus is the king. The magi come asking, *Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?*

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped. That is because the child Jesus was a king. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11).

Those men brought the child Jesus gifts for the same reason that Jesse sent bread and wine along with young David to King Saul, and the same reason that all the people who came to Solomon year after year brought gifts: that was the proper way to meet a king.

“No one should appear before me empty-handed.” Deut 16:16-17 (also Ex 23:15; 34:20)

Deut 16: ¹⁰ *Then celebrate the Festival of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you. ¹¹ And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you.*

Then celebrate the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you. We celebrate God's kindness by bringing a gift. If God has given lots, the gift is large; if God has given a little, the gift is small.

And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name. This was a happy time, a celebration where they rejoiced. And God told them where to do this: at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name.

There was a time and a place for this celebration. The Festival of Weeks, also called Pentecost, was the time, and the place was the tabernacle and later the temple.

The book of Psalms and other OT stories tell us that Israelites had deep, meaningful experiences of God when they were far from the temple: in their own homes, or out travelling or wherever. God did not meet with them only at the temple, not at all.

That is not a NT development, not at all. Israelite worship was entirely comfortable with that. Nevertheless and at the same time, coming to the temple meant coming to God and appearing before God in a way these other experiences did not accomplish.

So at the feast of Pentecost they celebrated by bringing their gifts and rejoicing at the central place of worship. And everybody came. Listen to this: *you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you.*

Everybody was to come to the temple celebrate, to bring a gift that matched what God had given, and to rejoice.

Deut 16:16 *Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles.*

God wanted everyone to come, but if not everyone could come, he at least wanted the men. Three times a year the household shall be represented at the temple. For some this was a trip of three or four days walking each way.

No one should appear before the LORD empty-handed: ¹⁷ Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you.

Exodus 23 says the same: (v14) *Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me.* (v15) *No one is to appear before me empty-handed.*

In Exodus 34: (v20) *No one is to appear before me empty-handed.* (v23) *Three times a year all your men are to appear before the Sovereign LORD, the God of Israel.*

No one should appear before me empty-handed. The atmosphere in Deuteronomy 16 is not commands or demands. It is festival, and rejoicing, and celebrate, and the whole household together, sons and daughters and male and female servants and foreigners and fatherless and widows, all to honour God for the gifts he's given. That's the atmosphere.

But bad manners and disrespect were not tolerated. Everyone brings this King a gift.

How do you think about *your* offering, when *you* give money to the Lord? Do you think about it as appearing face to face before *your* King, and showing him honour and respect? Is your offering an act of face to face worship before God?

That is not the only thing happening when we give money to the Lord, but it is certainly one of the important things that we're doing. God has blessed us, he has provided absolutely everything we have, and so we bring him a gift to show honour and thanks.

I've heard of churches where the offering plate is at the front, and everyone walks past and gives their gift to God at the front.

There's something entirely right about that, because it helps us understand that we are bringing a gift to God. Since everything else in church is done with the people facing the front, we picture God at the front, and walking to the front to give him our gift is good.

We might talk about this some time. No matter where the offering box is put, let's always understand ourselves as appearing before our King and giving honour to our King by bringing this gift. *No one is to appear before me empty-handed.*

NT: On the first day of the week, bring money in keeping with income (1 Cor. 16:1-2)

¹ *Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.* ² *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.*

Moses taught Israel to bring a gift in proportion to the God had blessed, and the apostle Paul here uses the same standard: *set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income.*

In neither case have our needs anything to do with it. We don't give by what is leftover from our needs. We give by what God gave us.

Moses taught them when to give these gifts – three times a year they came to the Temple and no one was to come empty-handed. Paul told these churches “when” as well: *on the first day of every week.*

Let's talk about the first day of the week. There are not very many Jews in the Corinthian church, and probably none in the Galatian churches. The big surprise here is not that they meet on the first day of the week, it is that they even know what a week is.

If you look up “ancient calendar” in an encyclopaedia, you will read about days and months and years, but nothing about weeks. The ancient world organized their calendars in different ways, but all were built around natural light.

They had days, because they had light and then they had dark and then they had light and then that had dark. So they called one of those a “day.”

And the moon gets bigger and bigger and then smaller and smaller and then it gets bigger again and then smaller again. One of those is called a “moon”, and our word “month” comes from “moonth,” one moon. That takes 28 days. All ancient calendars had a month of some kind.

And they had a year. The sun gets higher in the sky for some months, and then lower for some months, and then higher again, and lower again. That's one year.

But no one had a week. They did not have a 7 day week, or a 5 day week, or an 8 day week or a 10 day week. No weeks, period.

Except for the Jews, who had weeks built on God creating the world in six days. The rest of the world had often celebrated the new moon in some way, and perhaps stopped working, but otherwise every day was the same.

Even in Galatia, where there are no Jews, they know what the first day of the week is. When the first missionaries went out, they taught them all about 7 day weeks. Why did they do that? So they could keep the Jewish Sabbath?

No, they were never taught that, they were not taught to rest on the seventh day or on the first day. So why were these people taught about a 7 day week, and why did they meet on a 7 day cycle? This was to them as foreign as it would be to us if we started doing something every 5 days, or every 9 days.

The answer is: The Resurrection of Jesus!

They met on the first day of the Jewish week because Jesus rose on the first day of the week. The resurrection of Jesus was their proof that Jesus was the Christ and the Lord, and the resurrection of Jesus was their hope when they were dying.

Every Friday was Good Friday, and every Sunday was Easter Sunday. So the Gentile churches learned what a “week” was, which they’d never heard of at any length, and were taught a 7 day week so they could meet on the first day because that’s when Jesus rose.

The Corinthian and Galatian churches know what a week is, and something special happens on the first day of the week. *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income.*

I often hear Christians say “it does not matter on which day of the week we meet together.” I don’t know what to say. I think we’re not very connected to the resurrection of Jesus. I think Christians in NT times were more dependant on his resurrection.

They did not build their worship schedule around him dying for our sins. We’d probably have met on Fridays. But they built it around him rising from the dead, on Sunday.

I have been wandering somewhat, this part about the first day of the week. I indulged myself because this is a part of worship. Let’s go back to gifts.

In the ancient world, if a person was going to meet with a king, he or she brought a gift. Actually I think that some etiquette like this is still in effect. It certainly was in the ancient world, up to and including the Gospel of Matthew.

Through Moses God told Israel to appear before him at his dwelling three times a year, and that no one was to appear before him empty handed.

Scripture all the way through assumes that we need to be taught to respond to God, and we need to be taught how to respond. (Repeat) That’s where this comes from.

Israel needed to be taught to respond, and how to respond. Paul is doing the very same thing when he says, *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income.*

Your worship

What if, when you came to our gather on the first day of the week, you came to bring a gift to God? That's why you came. You came to give to appear before God as one would appear before a king, and you came to bring him a gift.

What if we all came to do the same thing the wise men did in Matthew 2 – they opened their treasures and gave gifts to Jesus the king? A gift of money is entirely acceptable. When God said, “no one should come empty-handed,” he meant money.

But there are other things to give. Hebrew 12:28 says, *Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably.* You could bring a gift of thanks. You could stand up and give thanks during the open time, or pray quietly at some point, or sing our thankful songs with conviction and sincerity. That would certainly be a gift to your king.

Later in Hebrews it says: *Let's offer a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Let's do good and share with others.* (13:15-16)

The sacrifice of praise, the gift of praise. Doing good and sharing what we have. These are all gifts to our God, they are acceptable worship.

Singing songs to God is certainly a gift. What if we came together to give to God our gifts, our thanks, our praise?

We sometimes call what we do a worship service. I don't know if we mean that, but it is a good label. Every think about it? Worship service. *We serve him by worshipping him.* We come together before him to serve him by giving gifts and honour and thanks.

That is not the only reason we come together, by any means. We also come to receive, because we need his help in different ways. But what if we let that part be God's business? What if we gathered to serve him, praise him, bring him our gifts, thank him; and we trusted that at the same time he would forgive us and bless us and help us?

Thanking God, honouring God, praising God, can be costly. There is some darkness in our lives, and we can hardly bring ourselves to thank God.

Think about God's gift to us. Remember that all our worship is response to God, because he acted first. God gave his Son for us. The Father watched the trial of Jesus, watched Jesus being humiliated and beaten, watched him being nailed to the cross, heard him cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and did not lift a finger.

What kind of nightmare was all that in heaven? Peter said that with God, one day can be like a thousand years. I think that in heaven that was one of those days that felt like a thousand years.

Jesus submitted to this of his own will, knowing ahead of time what was coming, could have walked away but went through it. This is Christ's gift to us, and the Father's gift to us. They were costly gifts.

Because of these gifts, we have become God's children, we are brought into his family and his embrace, and we have eternal life. Death still happens, but its sting is gone. A great inheritance is waiting for us.

So we meet together on the first day of the week, to appear before God with our gifts: our money, our praise, our thanks, and our reverence. Amen.