

**Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL**  
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**Worship Series: *Rethinking Religion***  
**Service Theme: *Rethinking the Worth of Worship***  
**Sermon Theme: *A Blessing Worth Fighting For***  
**March 3, 2024— John 2:13-22**

What is worship worth to you? I wouldn't want to have to ask that question 5 times fast, but it is an important question for us to ask ourselves. About 4 years ago, we had a very practical, hands-on opportunity to wrestle with that question. In mid-March 2020, worship changed dramatically when COVID forced the world to stop gathering for public worship. For 3 months, I led worship in a sanctuary occupied by me, an organist, 2 media booth people, and a sloth puppet named Steve, who sat in the front row.

During those months when everyone was worshipping from their living room couch instead of in sanctuary seats, we had to wrestle with the question, "What is worship worth to me?" For some, that forced time away from public worship reinforced how worthwhile worship is, stoking a fire to gather that online worship couldn't quench. Others still saw worship as worthwhile, but settled into the comfortable routine of worshipping while sipping their morning coffee from the couch in their jammies and fuzzy slippers. Others, out of the habit of worship, began feeling like worship wasn't worth much, and stopped altogether.

Obviously, a lot can change in four years. So, four years after worship got turned upside-down, it's good for us to again reflect on that question. "What is worship worth to you?" To help guide our rethinking of the worth of worship, this morning's sermon text shows us what worship is worth...to Jesus!

Towards the beginning of his earthly ministry, just a few days after his first miracle when he changed water into wine at a wedding, Jesus traveled 80 miles south to Jerusalem. Like all Jewish men, Jesus was required to make the annual trip to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover,

a special festival and feast God instituted to give his people an annual reminder of how he'd freed their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. But when Jesus entered the Temple in Jerusalem, he was appalled by what he saw.

***"In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money."*** To us, that sounds like a bizarre scene. But to a typical Jew, this was likely viewed as necessary business. As part of their worship life, God required his people to offer animal sacrifices for specific occasions and circumstances. And since Jews were required to come from all over to offer these sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, they needed to be able to purchase the sacrificial animals when they arrived.

The money changers were also necessary because every Jewish man was required to support the worship life at the Temple by paying a temple tax, which needed to be paid with specific coins. So these things might seem like necessary elements for Israel's worship.

But Jesus ***"made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"***

This seems so out of character for the typically warm, compassionate Jesus. So why does he do it? Because Jesus knew that worship is **A Blessing Worth Fighting For.**

There were two problems with this business: Where it was taking place, and why it was taking place. First, these sales were happening in the outer court of the Temple. This was called the Court of the Gentiles, because it was where non-Jewish people could come to pray to and worship God. Imagine trying to worship and pray on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, or even in the middle of your local Wal-Mart. Imagine trying to worship this morning if that corner of the sanctuary housed a bunch of lowing cattle, bleating sheep, and cooing doves, and in that corner were people shouting, bartering, or

complaining about exchange rates! While there was certainly need for such business, God wanted it done outside the Temple, not inside where it distracted from the ability to, and the focus of worship.

The other problem was why this business was being conducted. These businessmen weren't focused on selflessly allowing people to better worship God. They were taking advantage of the needs of others to better serve their bottom line! Much like airport stores and restaurants can charge exorbitant prices because they know you've got no other choice, the prices, rates, and fees of the animal sellers and moneychangers were exorbitant. In God's house, reverence had been replaced for revenue. God had been exchanged for greed. Worship took a backseat to wealth accumulation. And Jesus was having none of it.

To many people, such things might have seemed necessary— even beneficial. Because in their minds, worship is about the actions. If they offered their sacrifices, paid their tax, and checked off those boxes on their “to-do” list, that's all that really mattered. But Jesus knew that the worth of worship isn't found in the actions of worship, but in the object of worship! Clinking coins and noisy animals were distracting and detracting from people's focus on the object of their worship. So Jesus fought to drive out those distractions, and return the Temple to what it was supposed to be: his Father's house for worship, not a marketplace for wares.

Many Israelites in Jesus' day thought about worship much like many people in “religion” do these days. They view worship as something we're doing for God. And in a sense, that's true. The word “worship” comes from an old English word that means “to ascribe worth” to something. So as we worship God, we're showing him how much he's worth to us! But in most religions, worship is something people do for God in a meritorious sense. As in, I'm worshiping God so that he'll bless me and do good things for me; like worship is a contractual obligation we have to accomplish so God will take care of us.

If that's the driving motivation behind people's worship, no wonder so many don't see it being worth much! Who loves buttering up their

boss, in order to get a promotion, or not get fired? Who wants to kiss up to a king so he won't destroy you with his powerful army? That “worship” isn't driven by love, but by fear or obligation. And if our worship is driven by fear or obligation, without fail we'll grow weary of it, bored with it, or decide it's not really worth it anymore. Especially if we've been worshiping, but God isn't making our lives everything we want them to be in return!

If we see worship as just something we do for God, then like the Jews in Jesus' day, we'll get so caught up in the outward actions of worship that we'll lose sight of the object of our worship. We'll see worship not as a blessed opportunity, but as some boxes to be checked, and motions we need to go through.

Jesus knew how detrimental this misunderstanding of worship was for God's people, so he cracks the whip, screams and shouts, and flips over the tables in order to drive out all of the things that were distracting and detracting from the object of their worship—and therefore, the worth of worship!

Which brings the question back to us: What is worship worth to you? Your answer probably depends greatly on whether you see worship as strictly something you're doing for God, or something he's doing for you. Is worship worthwhile because of the actions of our worship? Or because of the object of our worship?

As we rethink the worth of worship, might there be some distractions that need to be driven out of our lives, hearts, and minds—like Jesus did at the Temple? Are there are things in your life that distract you from the object of your worship by preventing you from coming to worship altogether? Maybe it's your job which requires you to work every Sunday; or your kid's sports teams, which have tournaments every weekend; or your hobbies that are most easily enjoyed on peaceful, quiet Sunday mornings. If those distractions prevent you from the ability to worship, then if you can't make adjustments, that's something for which you need to fashion a whip and drive out of your life!

Or maybe it's your mindset that the worth of worship is all about the actions. You figure if you come to church a few times a year, you're checking that worship box and going through the motions. Or maybe you come regularly, but you figure because you came you can zone out, thinking about your to do list for this afternoon, what you'll eat for lunch, or about that school project due tomorrow. Or, you regularly come to worship out of slavish obligation, under the notion that unless you're in church, God can't or won't love you! If any of those describe you, you need to flip the tables and scatter the coins of such thinking, because it's distracting you from the object of worship!

Or maybe it's your mindset that the worth of worship is found in its outward actions. So if the worship doesn't include the style of music you like; or the pastor doesn't preach the way you'd like; or the sanctuary isn't as big, or small, or tech savvy as you'd like; or the people worshiping with you aren't as friendly as you'd like, or aren't the age or demographic you'd like—then you don't think such worship is worthwhile. If that's the case, then say to those infringing thoughts, ***“Get these out of here!”*** because those preferences about the outward actions of worship pull your attention away from the object of our worship!

Rethinking the worth of worship means rethinking what makes worship worthwhile! Worship is worthwhile because the object of our worship works powerfully through it for our spiritual, eternal good! After driving out the distractions from the Temple, angry Jews asked Jesus, ***“What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”***

They wanted to see a miracle that would backup his ability to do such a disruptive thing. And Jesus' response is why he needs to be the object of our worship! ***“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”***

The Jews misunderstood, thinking he meant the physical temple they were standing in. But Jesus meant they would destroy his body in death—but on the third day, he would be raised back to life again! Jesus points to himself as the object of our worship, because he's the

Messiah; God's chosen one; the Savior who would come to redeem the world from sin through his suffering and death. The one God promised to send who would defeat death once and for all, and give us assurance of eternal life through his resurrection!

That's why Jesus needs to be the object of our worship! He's the reason worship is worthwhile! Because every time we gather for worship, Jesus himself promises, ***“Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.”*** Every time we gather for worship, God provides a focused, intentional opportunity to rest in Jesus as he comes to us in Word and Sacrament, and through those means to be connected by faith to the forgiveness and salvation that the object of our worship has won for us! As Paul writes, ***“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word about Christ.”***

Every time we gather around Word and Sacrament in worship, we're reminded of God's promises in Jesus, and encouraged in our faith by fellow believers who love us, pray for us, build us up, and point us to Jesus. Every time we worship, the Holy Spirit works to feed and nourish our faith, so we are refreshed, equipped, and strengthened to serve Jesus and fight against Satan's attacks throughout another week!

So worship is worthwhile whenever it proclaims the Gospel and points us to Jesus. When our liturgy reminds us of our sins, and assures us of the forgiveness we have in Christ. When we hear God's Word proclaimed in the readings and sermon. When we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs that point us to Christ for us. When Jesus gives us his true body and blood to assure us of forgiveness in the Lord's Supper. Worship is worthwhile when it points us to the object of our faith.

Even the sacrifices that God commanded the Israelites to offer were intended to point them ahead to Jesus—the ultimate sacrifice who would be given, once and for all, on the altar of the cross, to pay for the sins of the whole world!

Jesus is the reason we need to rethink the worth of worship. It's not about us, or outward actions or circumstances. It's all about the object of our worship—our Savior Jesus. He is what makes worship a blessing worth fighting for! So let's gladly take up the fight, by God's power, to drive all the distractions, false ideas, and interfering mindsets from our lives, so we can focus on the one who makes worship worthwhile.