

## **Becoming an Intimate Worshipper**

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Worship: Worship as a Lifestyle

Psalm 15

Last week I told you that I was beginning a series in this New Year on worship that I've titled "Worship as a Lifestyle." There is a reason why, of course, that I've chosen the title for this series, "Worship as a Lifestyle," and that is because the word "worship" for most church goers and for most Christians simply refers to the first half hour or the first hour of a church's public meeting together – the singing portion of our meetings. I mentioned to you last week that the public expression of worship to God – our singing, our receiving teaching from the Bible, our tithes and offerings, our responses to God's Word and ministry – that's really just the tip of the iceberg. For the believer, worship is something that is done 24/7 in our lives. 24/7 we are living in the presence of Christ, responding to him, turning our attention to him, adoring him.

Today, what I want to do is to further the thought that worship is primarily not what we do for the half an hour or hour or two hours that a church gets together in its public meeting. Worship primarily deals with the individual's response to the revelation of God that that individual has. Today, I want to talk about the heart of worship, the essence of worship. The heart and essence of worship is developing an intimate, personal relationship with God.

According to the Bible, it is the nature of God to desire personal, intimate relationship with every person whom he has created. There is a verse in Revelation 3:20 that is often wrenched out of context for evangelistic appeals. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.

There is a truth, a reality that the way a person begins the Christian life is by opening the door of their heart to Christ and inviting him in. Over the years I have met many people who will tell me that they have always believed in Jesus. They were raised in a Roman Catholic Church, an Episcopal church, a Lutheran church, or a Baptist church. They have always believed in Jesus, ever since the time they were children. And you might be a person like that. You can't remember a time when you didn't believe in God, that you didn't believe in Jesus.

But my follow up question to folks who tell me that they've always believed in Jesus is: "That's wonderful that you believe in Jesus; but, have you received Jesus?" See, salvation is not just believing, but it also includes receiving. The Bible says that Jesus stands at the door of your heart and knocks. Have you

opened the door of your heart and actually received the spirit of Jesus Christ into your heart?

Many people, frankly, confess, "Well, no, I never really knew I was supposed to do that. I thought I was supposed to believe that Jesus existed and that the Bible stories about him were true. I didn't know that not only was there something to believe, but that there was someone to receive."

Have you received Christ? If he's been knocking on the door to your heart, "Let me in," have you opened the door and received him? It is absolutely true that the Christian life begins with Revelation 3:20. A person hears the knocking of Jesus on the door of their heart. They hear the voice of Christ and they open the door to let him in.

But, as I was suggesting at the opening of my remarks on Revelation 3:20, this verse is primarily aimed not at the non-Christian and how to begin the Christian life, but in its original context was aimed at the person who already had believed and received Christ. The verse was spoken to people in the Christian church in Laodicea. These were folks who had become lukewarm in their relationship with Jesus. They had once been burning white-hot for him, but their passion for Christ had cooled off. They were no longer particularly energetic or excited about their faith, not terribly motivated. They were like coco-cola without the fizz, just sort of flat. You drink it and you say, "Yuck. How long has the cap been off of this? Where's the fizz?"

And in many churches and Christian lives you have to ask the question, "where's the fizz gone in your life? How'd you go so flat?"

And Jesus says to people who have lost their fizz, especially to long-time Christians, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me."

What God desires in every believer's life is a deeper intimacy with you, a deeper fellowship with you. Jesus says he wants to come in and eat with us. In the ancient world, breaking bread with someone, eating with them, was not conceived of in the way we conceive of it in the modern world. You know, we're just going to grab a bite with someone. In the ancient world, breaking bread with someone, eating with them, was an act of intimate friendship and fellowship. Christ wants to eat with every one of his followers. He desires friendship with and intimacy with all of his children.

The heart of worship is intimacy.

The Bible uses a lot of different ways to describe the intimacy that God seeks with every follower of Christ. One of the words that Jesus uses to describe his followers is "friends." He says in John 15:13:

Greater love hath no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything I have learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Jesus is giving us a wonderful definition of friendship here in John 15. Jesus becoming a friend with someone is not just a matter of doing stuff with them.

"Well, I play golf with this person, so I guess he is my friend. She is a co-worker, so I guess she is a friend of mine."

"We have the same interests..."

"We both love to go antiquing..."

"We both love shopping at Pottery Barn..."

"We both love the same band..."

Jesus gives us a much deeper and richer, a more intimate understanding of friendship than just a person with whom I share similar interests – a person who just circumstantially happens to be in my work or school environment. Jesus says a friend is someone that you trust with your secrets.

Let me say that again. Jesus' definition of a friend is someone whom you trust with your secrets.

There was a Swiss psychiatrist, who was a Christian, named Paul Tournier. Tournier wrote a number of wonderful books. Among them was a book he simply titled *Secrets*. And he said that a child becomes an individual separate from his or her parents when the child recognizes that they have the power to have a secret. You see little children grinning and coming in and saying, "I know something you don't know." I'm separate from you, Mom and Dad. We are not just joined at the hip or just part of this big mass of protoplasm. One of the things that gives me my separate identity, Mom and Dad, is I know something you don't know. I have secrets.

When teenagers begins to forge their own identities, separate from their parents, one of the things that parents begin to notice is that the teenager becomes very secretive. Not all of this is bad. Teenagers become very defensive about their privacy. What they are beginning to discover is that secrets and privacy are part and parcel of becoming an individual.

Well, here's what Jesus is saying about friendship. Friendship is the compliment that one human being pays to another in saying that "I am going to give you this gift. I'm going to let you in on my private thoughts, something that you couldn't see or know. But as an act of love to you, as an act of respect to you, I am going

to share with you this secret.” Friends are people with whom we share our secrets, our confidences.

Jesus, in John 15, is saying the most amazing thing. He is saying, “I desire with my followers the intimacy of friendship, and so I am going to prove my friendship to you by sharing with you, and you only, secret things I have heard from God the Father.”

Now, the kind of intimate relationship that God desires with us goes beyond friendship. And in many, many passages in the scriptures, God describes his relationship with Christian believers as the relationship of a father to his children. Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father, who is in heaven...” Not just, “Dear Great and Awesome God...” but “Our Father who is in heaven.” In 1 John 3 we read, “How great is the love that the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are.” If you’ve not only believed in Christ, but you have also received him into your heart, you are a child of God.

And that is a particularly close picture of intimacy, when you see a child snuggled up on daddy’s lap and he has his arms wrapped around his child. There he is – content and secure, safe in his daddy’s arms. Or you see a baby asleep at his mother’s breast – content, full, he’s just nursed. Being a child of God is a statement of the desired intimacy that God wants with us.

Now listen, I just want to make one parenthetical comment about relating to God as Father. It has become so commonplace as to be an almost unquestioned truth in American Christianity that if you had a terrible relationship with your earthly father, that you are going to have a real problem relating to your heavenly Father. I can’t tell you how many folks over the years have said to me, “Well, I think my problem in relating to God is my earthly father.”

Listen to me for a moment here. I am not saying that your relationship with your earthly father doesn’t have any effect on the way you see God as Father. But I want you to know that there are almost no Bible passages to that effect. Since it has become almost a truism in the Christian world, one would think that there would be this plethora of Bible passages supporting this perspective. There are almost none. And what really troubles me about this view - that if you had a devastating relationship with your earthly father, then you are really going to struggle in your relationship with your heavenly Father - is not only the unbiblical nature of the claim, but that my heart is really broken for the people who think, “Well, I guess with my kind of background, I will never be able to really break through with God.”

Let me share with you an insight that the Lord gave me when I was about nineteen years old. I had heard this same thing. “Well, if you have been raised in a really bad home situation, you can’t expect to have a warm, intimate

relationship with God as your Father.” I was reading through the Bible, maybe for the first time, but I came upon a King named Josiah, who is mentioned in 2 Kings 22. It says that Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem for thirty one years. And it says of Josiah that neither before nor after him was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did with all of his heart and all of his soul and all of his strength. He had deep intimacy with God as his Father, and his Father in heaven approved of him and blessed his life.

Well, I began wondering, “Well, gee, what kind of family did Josiah come from?” His father and grandfather were among the worst idol worshippers in the history of the Jewish people. They were child sacrificers.

Do you know what the Lord spoke to me when I was nineteen years old? The Holy Spirit spoke to my heart, and he said, “Rich, it doesn’t matter what your family background is. You can be a Josiah. You can enjoy a warm, intimate relationship with God and walk uprightly with him, no matter who your father and mother were.”

See, friends, I hate any kind of determinism that would rob anyone of you of the hope and confidence – no matter what your mama and your daddy were like – whether you were the most favored in the family, or the least favored, or dad was an alcoholic or abuser or whatever. I hate anything that would rob you of the hope that you could enjoy as much intimacy with God as you want. I hate anything that would set a ceiling on me or on you and say, “Well, we can’t expect very much of Rich or of you because of your background.” I will say to anyone who suggests that, “Well, you don’t know the power of Jesus Christ to redeem, to change, to rescue. And you have no Bible on your side that suggests that there are limits on a person.”

The truth is the main reason why we have a distorted relationship with God the Father is not our dads or our mothers. It is the fallenness and brokenness that is our sinful nature.

There is a third image of intimacy that the Bible speaks a great deal about. That is the image of God’s people as the Bride of Christ. The relationship of a man and woman in marriage is even more intimate than that of a son or daughter to their father, or that of a friend to another friend. In worship, God wants to take you and me to the level of intimacy that only a man and woman, in the very best kind of marriage, have even a brief glimpse of. Christ in us, we in Christ – secured by covenant promises, self giving and self disclosing.

Now, listen. Just as there is no determinism in the parent-child relationship – if you’ve had a bad relationship with your dad that it automatically means that you are going to have a bad relationship with God as your Father – so I would say to you single people, you don’t need to experience marriage to feel the depth of

intimacy that God desires with you as a Bride of Christ. The people in the NT that enjoyed the greatest intimacy that the world has ever known with God were single people. The apostle Paul, Jesus of Nazareth - has anyone ever enjoyed greater intimacy with God, yet he was not married?

And those of you who are in a bad marriage, you don't need to have that control your relationship with God. Again, an example from the Old Testament, in 1 Samuel 25: a woman named Abigail was married to a fool, an awful, abusive, violent man, and yet Abigail enjoyed a deep, rich, relationship with God. Intimacy with God is what God is seeking in your worship of him. The intimacy of friends sharing secrets, of a child lying safe and secure in the arms of his loving father, of a man and a woman being naked and unashamed. This is the goal of biblical worship.

Now, let me switch gears for a moment here. Despite all of these portraits of intimacy, the Bible has another thread that runs through it. And that is the impossibility of a human being on his or her own achieving intimacy with God. Currently, there are all these new religious movements in this country claiming that through one of their teachings or practices, a person can achieve oneness with God.

"Just come to our seminar..."

"Learn how to meditate..."

"Arrange the furniture in your room in a certain way..."

"Burn these candles..."

"Fill your senses with this aroma..."

"Go to this spa..."

"Travel to this spiritual vortex..."

"Make a pilgrimage to this ancient Native American site..."

And you will suddenly become one with the universe and one with God.

But you know, the Bible tells us repeatedly that it is an impossibility for a person on their own to become intimate with God. See, we must not ever reduce the challenge of intimacy. Intimacy with God, closeness in worship, knowing God and being known, being lost in love with God – all of those things are impossibilities for human beings on their own.

And the reason they are impossible is because of who God is and who we are. God is holy and we are sinful. Holiness and sin cannot coexist. They are utterly incompatible, just as light and darkness are utterly incompatible.

And the distance between human beings and God is expressed throughout the Bible with a number of different metaphors. Sometimes the distance between us and God is expressed as God being high above us. God is called the High and Lofty One who lives in heaven. He is called the Most High God, the Lord Most High. Heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool.

Not only is God said to be high above us, but he is also said to be far away from us. Throughout the Old Testament, people were repeatedly told not to try to get too close to God. When Moses had his experience with God by the burning bush, God said to Moses in Exodus 3, “Don’t come any closer.” When Moses was called up on Mt. Sinai, the Lord directed to him to put a fence around the mountain. “Don’t let the people get too close. Because if anyone touches the mountain, an animal touches the mountain, a human being touches the mountain, they are going to die. Back off.” When God gave instructions regarding the building of the Tabernacle in the Temple, there was a thick curtain that separated the holy place where priests made their offerings from the Holy of Holies, where the presence of God was.

Over and over the biblical message is God is high above us, far away from us. God is light and we are darkness. God is pure and we are clothed with filthy rags. Intimacy with God is impossible for human beings to achieve on their own. And I’ll tell you something, friends, whether you are not yet a Christian or you are a Christian, you are spending your efforts attempting to achieve the impossible. You are trying to get close to God on your own.

The Good News of the gospel is that Christ has achieved for us what we cannot achieve on our own – intimacy with God, closeness to God.

Let me read to you from Hebrews 10:

Therefore brothers [and sisters], since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that you opened for us through the curtain that is through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

When Christ died on the cross, the curtain in the Temple that separated human beings from God, the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, was torn from top to bottom by the invisible hand of God, visibly displaying to us that intimacy with God is now possible through the blood of Christ. The thing that kept us from God, namely God’s wrath directed toward our sins, has been satisfied. Payment has been made. The penalty has been paid. God’s wrath has been appeased. God’s perfect law has been obeyed. Satan has been defeated. His accusations have been answered. God’s love and justice have been demonstrated. And we have been saved. Not only saved from our sins, but saved for intimacy with God.

Friends, intimacy is not something we achieve, but something that we receive. Intimacy is a gift made available through the cross of Christ. Do you get it?

Well, if intimacy has been achieved, then why do so many of us as Christians experience so little intimacy? Turn with me in your bibles to Psalm 15. Psalm 15 tells us that the experience of intimacy with God is not determined by our relationship with our earthly father or mother, or by our experience with marriage, or really anything outside of us – although those things certainly can affect us. Our experience of intimacy is affected by our practices of righteousness.

Listen to me now. Theologians talk about us being positionally right with God. You do not achieve rightness with God, intimacy with God, closeness to God, the satisfaction of God, by anything you do. God is fully satisfied by the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. When Christ was on the cross dying, right before he gave up his spirit to God, the apostle John records his dying words. In the Greek it is “Tetelestai, salvation has been, is, and will be finished forever.”

Psalm 15 tells us about the experience of intimacy:

Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?  
He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks  
the truth from his heart

Our experience of intimacy is tied to our walk – “He whose walk is blameless,” our works – “he who does what is righteous,” and our words – “who speaks the truth from his heart.”

Listen to me now. The tendency of all religion is to separate worship on the one hand from life on the other. I remember in high school, a significant part of my high school class was Roman Catholic. I remember, on Saturday nights my Catholic friends would go to church, take confession, and take communion. And then we would all go out and get drunk.

My wife, Marlene, went to a little Pentecostal church in high school. There was an older couple she happened to know who every week would give a public tongue, interpret the tongue, prophecy, carry on in worship, and then, in private, fight like cats and dogs.

The Israelites in the Old Testament would regularly offer up to God sheep and goats and lambs from their flocks, celebrate all of the Jewish holidays, and yet, oppress the poor, get divorced, and practice adultery.

All of biblical religion converges on this single point: worship is a lifestyle. God doesn't want you to just sit and sing loudly to him, raise your hands, or put on your church face. You worship God and experience intimacy when your walk (that is, your lifestyle), your works and your word are righteous.

Let me bring this down to earth for you. You say, “I want to be intimate with God. I want to experience the goal of worship. I don't want this big separation



between what I do in church on Sunday and how I live my life Monday through Saturday.”

Well, the psalmist tells us, “Let’s make this practical. Look at your words. “Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?” Who is going to experience closeness and intimacy with the Holy God? “The person who has no slander on his tongue and does his neighbor no wrong.”

You know, there is a stupid nursery rhyme that says: “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” The truth is as every one of us knows from childhood, words are far more powerful than sticks and stones. Do you think there’s a difference between saying to a child, “You have the prettiest smile. I love your dimples,” and having some kids on the playground say, “Hey, Dumbo-ears...when are you going to fly away?” I bet that everyone of you can immediately conjure up in your mind some mean thing that someone said to you when you were a child twenty years ago, thirty years ago, for some of you fifty or sixty years ago. Maybe you were made fun of because of you height, or your weight, or the fact that you wore glasses, or your braces, or your hair, or your knees, or your family.

Friends, we must begin to respect the power of words. The Bible says that God spoke the universe into existence. Words are powerful. If you are a defendant in a criminal trial, there is a world of difference between a verdict of “not guilty” and a verdict of “guilty.” Words are powerful. We Americans experienced the power of words recently with President Bush’s marvelous speech a few days after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack on the WTC and the Pentagon.

Words can be life giving. Words can be life destroying. I remember a wife sitting in my office a number of years ago. She didn’t attend our church, but she set up an appointment and came in and said, “I just felt the need to tell you something about a man who just joined your church. Five years ago I would not have been psychologically strong enough to say this. The man is my ex-husband. During our marriage, he would verbally attack me in such a vicious way, just follow me around the house taunting me, tearing me down, mocking me in such an abusive way I used to beg him to stop. He did it until I literally would fall on the floor in the bathroom crying. And then he would call up one of his friends to come over and say, “I don’t know what to do. She’s in the bathroom again on the floor crying.”

Words are powerful. I’ve told you this story before. Since we’ve so many new people in the church, some of you have not heard it. You know, my home life as a child was not a particularly happy one. My parents fought all the time. I used to hear some terrible words hurled back and forth at each other. If you’ve been in a bad marriage, or if you’ve grown up in a home in which your parents attacked each other, you can understand what it was like for me growing up with the constant fighting.

Well, there were not a lot of encouraging, affirming, life-giving words spoken in my home. When I was in third grade, I had a teacher that I adored. She was the epitome to me of everything I wanted in a mother. Unfortunately, my teacher got pregnant, and in those days when a teacher was pregnant and began to show, they removed her from the classroom. I suppose they thought that maybe the kids would start asking questions, or pregnancy was a disease that a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader could catch. But I remember the last day that she was going to be in our class teaching us. We had a little party for her, and I was sitting at my desk very, very sad. She was up front, and, in front of the whole class, she said, "Richard, would you come up here?"

I walked up and I was almost crying because I didn't want to see her go. She picked me up and put me on her lap. She whispered in my ear, "Richard, if I have a little boy, I want him to grow up to be exactly like you." And then she kissed me.

Think those words had any affect on a loved-starved eight year old?

You know, you and I constantly make choices regarding whether we are going to speak life to another person through encouragement, affirmation, and thanksgiving or take life away through criticism, slander. As an extravert, someone who speaks a lot, my speech is constantly getting me into trouble. And one of my constant prayers is Psalm 141:3, "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord. Keep watch over the door of my lips." Put a muzzle over my mouth. Help me to choose life giving words.

And then here's another practice that will enable us to experience intimacy with God. Verse 4, "Who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the Lord, who keeps his oath, even when it hurts." Why should you keep your promises? So that you can be known as a reliable person, so that other people would trust you, because integrity demands it?

But you know, what the psalmist is saying is keep your promises because intimacy with God demands it. Promise keeping is a form of worship. You worship God when you speak life to another individual, or encouragement, or thanksgiving, when you choose not to sin with your mouth, choose not to slander, choose not to gossip; and you worship God when you keep your promises even when it hurts.

How different the Christian church would look if just Psalm 15:4 was universally practiced – that we kept our promises even when it hurts. Isn't it the case, friends, that we make commitments and then some thing comes up, some unanticipated circumstance arises, and we desire to break that commitment.

In high school a girl agrees to spend Saturday evening with her friend, but then a really cute boy asks her out. What's she going to do? Or you are asked to the prom and you agree to go. But then your number one choice comes along and asks you.

Who keeps their promises even when it hurts?

Or you make a commitment to go to a small group, but the week has been really crazy, and you are tired. Who keeps his promises even when it hurts?

Or you've made an agreement to teach in our children's ministry. But things have gotten so piled up in your life, and everything is so hectic that you decide to blow it off. Who keeps his promises even when it hurts?

Or you make a business deal and enter a contract because you expect the market to do certain things. You expect the contract to turn out for you profitably, but you begin to really bleed money, and now you are scrambling for a way to get out of the contract, or to pretend that the contract means something other than what it means.

Or you sign a church membership covenant, and agree that you are going to give financially to the church, or serve in the church, or be involved in a small group, but it is just not very convenient for you.

Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? The person who keeps his promises even when it hurts!

Or let me raise the stakes just a little higher. You made a promise before God and before witnesses that you would live together in holy matrimony "until death us do part." And now keeping that promise hurts because your marriage in no way resembles what you hoped for when you exchanged vows.

Why should you be a promise keeper even when it feels like keeping your promise injures your own self interest? Why should you speak life giving words when it is so tempting to take out the verbal knife, or to gossip. Why be fair in your business dealings? Because keeping promises, speaking life, and being fair and just are acts of worship. Because if you do these things, you will experience intimacy with God that Christ has achieved for you on the cross.

The main obstacle to intimacy with God is not, as is commonly said, your past. It is your practices. Walk in the light, as he is in the light, and you will have fellowship with God. Let's pray.

## **Becoming an Intimate Worshipper**

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Rich Nathan

January 12-13, 2002

Worship: Worship as a Lifestyle

Psalm 15

### **I. Portraits of Intimacy**

- A. Friend of Christ (John 15:13-15)
- B. Children of God (1 John 3:1-2; 2 Kings 23:25)
- C. Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-23)

### **II. Our Position of Intimacy (Hebrews 10:19-22)**

### **III. Our Practice of Intimacy (Psalm 15)**

- A. Living Consistently vs. Being Religious (Psalm 15:1, 2)
- B. Speaking Life vs. Speaking Death (Psalm 15:3)
- C. Keeping Promises vs. Breaking Commitments (Psalm 15:4)