

August 28, 2016 sermon: “Worship God and God Alone” by Pastor Christine Myers-Tegeder

In this sermon series Pastor Mike has included several Psalms. The Psalms, as old as they are, continue to be great expressions of who God is and how we can struggle with this as human beings. Some Psalms are songs from us to God. Such as Psalm 80 we looked at two weeks ago where the psalmist asks God “how long do we wait for you?” However, in Psalm 81 we hear from God to us. The communication goes the other way. And God’s message in this Psalm is as important to us now as it was to the people of ancient Israel. So hear these words from Psalm 81.

Psalm 81

- 1 Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob!
- 2 Begin the music, strike the timbrel, play the melodious harp and lyre.
- 3 Sound the ram’s horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full, on the day of our festival;
- 4 this is a decree for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
- 5 When God went out against Egypt, he established it as a statute for Joseph. I heard an unknown voice say:
- 6 “I removed the burden from their shoulders; their hands were set free from the basket.
- 7 In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud; I tested you at the waters of Meribah.
- 8 Hear me, my people, and I will warn you—if you would only listen to me, Israel!
- 9 You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not worship any god other than me.
- 10 I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.
- 11 “But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me.
- 12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.
- 13 “If my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways,
- 14 how quickly I would subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes!
- 15 Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him, and their punishment would last forever.
- 16 But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”

This is God’s Word for us this morning. This is a dramatic Psalm. There is a lot going on. It begins with a call to worship, much like what we do at the beginning of our worship services. This one says “Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob!” Sounds familiar doesn’t it? Then there is a call for instruments to be used. The Psalms are one of the parts of scripture that confirm for us that music and not just music, but music with instruments was part of worship in Bible times. In this case the music is also because this is part of a festival. Verse 3 mentions the new moon and the ancient Israelites celebrated each new moon with the lunar month along with the Sabbath each week.

Then, after this call for worship and this music with instruments, the tense of the text changes because God begins to speak. And God starts with reminding them of what God has done for them in the past. God reminds them that he is the God of Jacob and Joseph, early fathers that we studied this summer and to whom we know God was faithful despite their human shortcomings. God reminds them that he brought them out of Egypt and that even after that, when they grumbled in the wilderness, God answered them. When they complained for water and Moses struck the rock at Meribah (which you can find back in Exodus 17), God answered them. God has a long track record of delivering the people of Israel. But, they still struggled to follow God. And this is where God picks it up in verse 8. Listen to what God says here; “Hear me, my people, and I will warn you—if

you would only listen to me, Israel! You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not worship any god other than me. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.” So here we are in Psalm 81. God has been telling Israel to worship the one and only true God rather than false gods since Genesis. And yet God is having to say it again. Why is this such an issue? Why is a command from the Ten Commandments still coming up in the Psalms?

I know that most of you are familiar with the Ten Commandments and that most of you know that the very first one is “you shall have no other gods before me.” This is a command that Christians agree on with little difficulty. When you are growing up, commands like “honor your father and mother” are not as quickly agreed upon. But this is an easy one. Of course we are not supposed to worship any other gods. And you might think that this is easy to do. Probably none of us have gotten on our knees and prayed to the god of the sun or the sea or a gold statue. This command from God and this reminder in Psalm 81 seems obvious. However, I would like to propose that idolatry, the worship of other gods, is a little more tricky than we give it credit. What we worship is not so simple. The worship of false gods is an easy trap we can fall into. And Satan likes the fact that this is tricky. And to identify this more clearly, we have to look at two aspects of the worship of false gods. The first is identifying the false gods and the second is defining what worship is.

First, the challenge of identifying false gods. When we picture a false god, what do we picture? We picture the golden calf in the famous Ten Commandments movie right? We picture statues made by tribal people in foreign countries. We picture possibly things like money or drugs. In general, when we think of false gods or idols, we think of something bad. And friends, this is the first deceptive pitfall about idolatry. It does not have to be something bad. In fact, anything good, can be turned into an idol or false god. We sometimes have this false sense that if we surround ourselves with good things, that we can’t possibly be worshipping false gods. But that is simply not true. ANYTHING good can be turned into an idol or false god. Pastor and author Tim Keller writes this: “Sin isn’t only doing bad things, but it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God.” So anything we would normally think of as good, can become an idol or false god. Now hold this thought while we define what worship actually is. We will come back to the false gods in a minute.

Let’s look at the other part of this. If we are talking about the worship of false god, we need to define the word worship as well. The Webster dictionary has two basic definitions of worship. The first is “the act of showing respect and love for a god.” This seems like a reasonable definition, although keep in mind that what we identify as a “god” will get challenged in a few minutes. But respect and love are reasonable assumptions for worship. The dictionary also has several other words associated with worship. These include the words adore, idolize, esteem worthy, reverence, and homage. When you add some of those words, there are a lot of places in my own life I can see myself adoring or finding worthy where those things may not be God.

But let’s look at how God defines worship. God establishes the need for worship of God as early as the story of Cain and Able in Genesis 4, the 4th chapter of the entire Bible. Then, there is the great command, what Israel called the Shema, which is “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.” That is found in Deuteronomy and Numbers and then is reiterated by Jesus Christ in Matthew chapter 22. There is an implication here that worship requires love of God in all areas, our hearts and our minds and our strengths. Jesus also defines worship in John chapter 4. In his famous exchange with the Samaritan woman, Jesus tells her this starting in verse 23 “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” This explanation by Jesus tells us that worship is a very intimate and inward thing, not just an outward act. That God’s spirit is to be

present and we, in relationship with God, worship in that spirit and in truth. Worship is part of our personal relationship with God.

So, with this in mind, let's go back to identifying false gods. Remembering that any good thing can become an idol or false god, with that in mind, what are the things that we truly adore in our lives? What are our sources of truth? I came up with a list of things, good things, and I don't want you to be offended. All of these things are good things, but all of them have the potential to become idols, items of worship if god is not kept in front of them. And all of these things could apply to me as well. A list of good things that Satan can take and turn into false gods: jobs, hobbies, money, sports, food, political involvement, social advocacy, family members, and friends. These are all good things, all things that God may have given us good passions for. But if we put them *before* God, if we let them become our number one focus rather than God leading us in them for God's glory, they become false gods.

It is also important to realize that we, as creative beings made in the image of a creative God, we have the ability to create things to worship. In *The Wounded Healer*, which is a great book by theologian Henri Nouwen, he retells a tale from ancient India. It goes like this: Four royal brothers decided each to master a special ability. Time went by, and the brothers met to reveal what they had learned. "I have mastered a science," said the first, "by which I can take but a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it." "I," said the second, "know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones." The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin, and the hair." "And I," concluded the fourth, "know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete." Thereupon the brothers went into the jungle to find a bone so they could demonstrate their specialties. As fate would have it, the bone they found was a lion's. One added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life. Shaking its mane, the ferocious beast arose and jumped on his creators. He killed them all and vanished contentedly into the jungle. (Henri Nouwen reminds us) We too have the capacity to create what can devour us. Goals and dreams can consume us. Possessions and property can turn and destroy us—unless we first seek God's kingdom and righteousness, and allow Him to breathe into what we make of life."

Isn't that a great story? A reminder that we can create good and wonderful things, and end up worshipping them and they can destroy our relationship with the one we are meant to worship. It can happen so easily. You can have worked so hard on a project at work and rationalize, but I've worked so hard on this. God must want me to finish it." But at what expense? At the expense of prayer time, reading the Bible, staying connected to the God that gave you that ability in the first place? The traps are so easy to fall into. The false gods are everywhere. They won't jump out as obvious bad things. You have to be on the look out for what is between you and God.

Another trap is worshipping something good that God has given you and rationalizing that worshipping that good thing glorifies God in the process. For example, I could say that God has given me the gift of music. And I was a professional musician. And for a time music was my whole life. Training and studying to rehearse and perform with professional orchestras was all I did day in and day out. I worked on Sundays. I had no personal time for God. But my rationalization was that I was devoting my life to a gift God gave me. Well, Adrian Rogers writes the following and I think he makes a good point: "Suppose a woman walks into a room and finds her husband embracing another woman. The husband sees his wife out of the corner of his eye and says, "Now wait a minute, honey. Don't get the wrong idea here. Let me tell you what I was doing. This woman is so beautiful, she reminded me of you. I was really just thinking of you when I embraced her." Now there is not a woman in America who would buy that! There is not a wife in this sanctuary that would buy that. And Rogers reminds us that God doesn't buy it either when we worship something else and say, "Now, Lord, wait a

minute. Don't get the wrong idea here. I was only worshiping this thing because it reminds me of You. I'm really worshiping You." God is not impressed by this.

Since the time of the ancient Israelites humanity has found ways to put other things and other people before God. And one has to ask, why is it so important to worship God first and God alone? Why can't we bask in the earthly pleasures that we are tempted to worship? What would be so bad about worshipping football or a successful career, or your grandchildren? Well God reminds us in this Psalm, beginning in verse 13: God says this; "If my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways, how quickly I would subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes! Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him, and their punishment would last forever. But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you." God makes two promises here. If we worship God and God alone, God promises to 1) be on our side when we need it. If you put God first God will help you conquer the foes and dangers in your life. Now one has to be careful, this is not a promise that there will be no enemies or problems. Rather, it is a promise that when they challenge you, God will be with you and God will be stronger than they are. The other promise is 2) that God will satisfy you. God will fill you. Back in verse 10 he said "Open wide your mouth and I will fill it." It is that simple, be open to God and God will satisfy you.

I have heard many times that money cannot make you happy. And although I know that is true, there have been several times in my life where money was tight and I pointed out to God that although money would not make me happy, I would be "happier" if I could pay my bills. Paying the bills is a good thing. I am not putting that down. But I do remind you that money will not satisfy you. God is clear here that we are only meant to be satisfied by God. There have been extensive studies on happiness. It is something we care a lot about. And according to the Huffington Post, experts have recorded that external circumstances such as career success, income, net worth, health, beautiful homes, education level, and personal appearance only account for 10% of a person's happiness. The other 90% comes from someplace else. Someplace internal, not external. And if you remember, that is where Jesus said that true worship is found. We are meant to worship in spirit and in truth. The other 90% comes from our relationship with God. And this is why our relationship with God and our worship of God have to come before everything else. Not because God is arrogant, but because it is what is best for us and WE cannot do better than God. God is who will satisfy, while the other gods of this world; money, career, hobbies and friends, will not satisfy.

We can tell from Psalm 81 that the people of Israel struggled to follow God. They struggled with idols and false gods. It gets repeated over and over again in this Psalm that the people will not listen to God. In verses 8, 11, and 13 God says "if only my people would listen to me. If only they would submit to me and follow me." Friends, I do not think it is any easier to resist false gods today than it was back then. Our culture exalts and promotes every god except the one true God. But what the repetition in this Psalm indicates to us is that God wants us to worship him, God wants us to follow him. God has not given up. You can still do it. You can put God first. You can carefully look at your life and see where false gods have crept in, where good things have become good out of proportion, where you have gotten side-tracked and put your adoration on earthly things more than the heavenly God that created them. And the result will not be that you find yourself deprived. Rather, God promises to satisfy you and fill you. And God is a God of promises kept. May we all worship the one true God and worship him only. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.