

### Introduction:

There is one very simple key to having positive relationships; simple to know, not always simple to follow. This one key will work whether you are talking about family relationships, work relationships, neighborhood relationships, congregational relationships, any relationships. **Philippians 2:3-4** explains it. Instead of putting ourselves forward and pursuing our own desires, the key to positive relationships is to seek what the others desire and need. Count them as more important and significant and strive to be what they want you to be in the relationship. This will work in all relationships and the same principle should especially govern our relationship with God. Instead of putting ourselves forward and our wants and interests as the most important, demanding that God provide them, we need to view God as more important. What does He want? What interests Him? What is He looking for in our walk with Him? **John 4:23-24** gives us the answer. "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (ESV). God is seeking true worshippers to worship Him in spirit and in truth. If we want a positive relationship with God, we need to pursue this goal. We must be these worshippers. This really is the foundation of our relationship with Him. We simply cannot walk with God, if we do not examine what God is seeking from us in this text.

### Discussion:

#### I. *True* worshippers...

- A. God is looking for *true* worshippers. John uses this formula repeatedly throughout his gospel. Jesus is the *true* light (**John 1:9**), the *true* bread out of heaven (**John 6:32**), the *true* vine (**John 15:1**). His point is about being the genuine article, not a fake, not a cheap imitation, not a copy, but the real thing. It means not being a worshiper in name only but really being a worshiper. It means as we worship we correspond to every aspect of what worship is. God doesn't want posers and pretenders. He doesn't want lip service, He wants true worshippers. According to **John 17:3**, Jehovah is the true God. He is no pretender, no fake idol, no false claimant. He is the genuine article, the true and living and powerful God. He deserves nothing less than true worshippers.
- B. Consider **Jeremiah 7:1-28**. This decree was to those who came to the temple to worship Jehovah (**7:2**). Yet, they were not true worshippers. From this chapter, we learn three keys about being *true* worshippers.
  1. *Put your trust in God, not in the forms and patterns (7:4, 12-15)*. The Israelites were going to the right temple. In fact, they placed their trust in "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord" (ESV). They were conducting the right sacrifices, by the right people at the right times. Yet, they were not true worshippers. Why? They trusted in doing the right things, more than in serving the right God. Don't misunderstand. They had to worship at the proper temple. If not, their worship was just as vain. However, their trust needed to be in God, not the forms and patterns of the temple. We can do the same. Do we put our trust in assembling with a group that uses the right name? Do we put our trust in accurately following a particular set of right actions? Or do we put our trust in serving the right God, His way? "Do not trust in these deceptive words, 'This is the church of Christ, the church of Christ, the church of Christ.'" Or "Do not trust in these deceptive words, 'We sing without instruments, we sing without instruments, we sing without instruments. We take the Lord's Supper every Sunday, every Sunday, every Sunday.'" Our trust must not be in following the right forms and pursuing the right patterns, but in serving the right God. When we are trusting in serving the right God, then having the proper forms and patterns will follow. After all, when Israel was concerned about serving Jehovah, they went to the right temple. However, when our trust is in the forms and patterns, our heart can easily slip away.

2. *Obey God always (7:9-10, 23-28)*. The Israelites were not true worshipers because their worship was a hoax. They came into God's presence as if they were true servants who wanted to honor God. Instead, they were fakes who wanted to follow their own course but buy their way into God's good graces by marking worship at the temple off their checklist. They believed, apparently, that if they met the minimum requirement of going to the temple every so often, offering a sacrifice and prostrating themselves before God, that they had met the requirements to go to heaven. However, their worship was false because it did not stem from true service to God. In **Matthew 4:10**, Jesus said we must worship God and serve Him only. Notice the two words—worship and serve. These same two words are used repeatedly in the Old Testament, usually to say what the Israelites were not to do with false gods. They were not to worship or serve them. The implication was they were instead to worship and serve the Lord. These two aspects of submission to God are inseparable. Our worship is to emanate from our service. If our worship is not the natural progression of our obedient service to God, then we are not true worshipers. The Israelites did not worship God because they were His obedient servants. Their worship did not proceed from their desire to serve God. Rather, their worship was an attempt to buy God off because they weren't serving Him all the time. If we think we can live sinful lives or even merely apathetic, half-hearted Christian lives but make up for it by saying our prayers or "going to church" we are wrong. True worshipers worship because it is the natural product of obedient service.
  3. *Worship only God (7:9-10, 17-18)*. We can only be true worshipers if we only worship Jehovah. If we are serving and worshiping other gods, then nothing we offer to God as worship amounts to anything. We might easily think we are safe in this regard because we do not make idols and bow before them. However, remember **Philippians 3:19**. If our God is our belly, that is, if we are serving our own fleshly passions most of the time, the worship we offer the true God is not true worship. Also remember **Colossians 3:5**. If we are coveting material goods, we have become idolaters. True worshipers only worship the true God.
- C. God is seeking *true* worshipers. How are we doing on this?

II. True worshipers to *worship* Him...

- A. God is looking for true worshipers to worship Him. The statement seems to be a tautology. That is, it seems to be a needless repetition of an obvious statement. Clearly, if they are true worshipers, they will worship. However, Jesus said this for emphasis. God is seeking worship. This word is in the active voice, that is, it is something the subject is doing. We are to worship God. Worship is not something we are. It is not an emotion. It is not an attitude. Worship is an action. But what action? Let us first notice what this passage does not say. It does not say the Father is seeking "church-goers" to "go to church" in spirit and truth. Sadly, because of our unbiblical language of referring to our assemblies as "worship services" too many of us equate worship with "going to church," thinking, "I went to church this week, so I worshiped." Further, Jesus did not say the Father is seeking true worshipers to perform five actions. Sadly, because we have unbiblically labeled our assemblies as worship services, we have then labeled each action we take in the assembly as worship and that has sometimes muddied our understanding of **John 4:23-24**. Before figuring out what Jesus is asking of us in the verse we automatically replace "worship" with "singing, praying, teaching, giving, and taking the Lord's Supper." Those five things may or may not all be worship, but that is not what this verse is about.
- B. The English word "worship" comes from the concept of "worth-ship." The idea is to declare something or someone as worthy. Our English word, however, can be somewhat confusing because it can be broad and varied in meaning. The word translated worship in **John 4:23-24** is "proskuneo." There are other words also translated "worship" in the New Testament. Sadly, the fact that our English word can sometimes be accurately used to describe varying concepts, our study gets muddied up. However, in this lesson, we are not concerned with everything our English word "worship" can possibly mean in different contexts. We are concerned with what Jehovah God is seeking based on **John 4:23-24**. "Proskuneo" means "literally, to kiss toward someone, to throw a kiss in token of respect or homage" (*The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, Spiro Zodhiates, AMG Publishers, Chattanooga, TN, 1993, p 1233—Strong's Number 4352). However, the word was about more than just its literal meaning. It was actually a cultural picture

that is somewhat lost on us. Zodhiates continues, “The ancient oriental (especially Persian) mode of salutation between persons of equal rank was to kiss each other on the lips; when the difference of rank was slight, they kissed each other on the cheek; when one was much inferior, he fell upon his knees and touched his forehead to the ground or prostrated himself, throwing kisses at the same time toward the superior” (p. 1233-34).

- C. If you have the capability, you should search your Bible for the word “proskuneo” used in this passage and its Hebrew counterpart, “sahah” (Strong’s Hebrew 7812). It is frequently very literally tied to kneeling or prostration; e.g. **Job 1:20; Psalm 95:6; Isaiah 44:17; Matthew 2:11; 4:9; 28:9; Acts 10:25; I Corinthians 14:25; Revelation 4:10; 5:14**. “Proskuneo” worship was very literally coming into the presence of a superior and prostrating one’s self out of humility. It represented inferiority and unworthiness. It was a declaration that the one to whom worship was offered was far more worthy, honorable, glorious and important. I do not want to suggest that “proskuneo” worship is limited to kneeling and prostration, however, I do find it very interesting that the very thing our ancient counterparts most viewed as worship is one thing few of us have ever done and we would never do in what we have unbiblically called our “worship service.” In fact, many of us would be extremely upset if somebody got in the aisles and lay prostrate during one of our prayers or songs. The Muslims take their prayer rugs and prostrate themselves as they worship. The Catholics kneel a lot. The Pentecostals lay out before God. Yet we say, “We would never do such a thing, we follow the pattern.” Oh wait, prostration is often part of the worship pattern. Why hasn’t that ever made it on to our list of worship acts? I further find it interesting that in our modern religious culture we have a lot of people asking, “Can we raise holy hands in our assemblies?” and almost no one ever asks, “Can we lay prostrate in our assemblies?” Does this indicate something about the modern attitude toward our relationship with God and worship toward Him? Perhaps.
- D. Having said that, and I hope you will think about it, I do recognize worship is more about the heart and spirit than the body. It is about spiritually doing what we see in **Revelation 4:10**. It is about spiritually falling down before God, casting down our golden crowns. Regrettably, the Bible nowhere completely defines or describes worship. In fact, if you simply search for the word “worship,” you will find that most often the text just says someone worshiped without explaining what they did to worship. However, there are some interesting parallels given in various passages about “proskuneo” worship that I believe helps us grasp what God is seeking from us.
1. **Psalm 132:7** provides a very interesting part of worship. Keep this in mind because it will become important when we consider worshipping in spirit. Worship was something done in the presence of the one being worshipped. The Israelites went to the dwelling place of God, to His footstool to worship Him. This is why Hezekiah had told the Israelites they could only worship God at the altar in Jerusalem and before no other altar (**II Chronicles 32:12**).
  2. In **Matthew 4:10**, Jesus said we are to worship only God. Interestingly, the passage Jesus is quoting is **Deuteronomy 6:13**. That passage doesn’t say worship. It says “fear.” By Jesus’ own use of the words, worship is connected to fear. This fear is reverence and awe, but it is produced by awareness of God’s power and judgment. Consider how it is used in **II Samuel 1:14; I Chronicles 13:12**. Worship is to be offered with the awe and fear that comes from knowing we are sinners in the hands of God.
  3. According to **Psalm 99:5, 9**, worship is connected with exalting God. Isn’t that what the elders and creatures in **Revelation 4:10ff** were doing—exalting God? They exalted God by lowering themselves. By casting down their own claims to any kind of worthiness, falling down before God and then praising Him verbally.
  4. Akin to the last point, **Psalm 96:7-9** links worship with ascribing to God the glory due His name. Consider a practical example in **Matthew 14:33** where the people in the boat worshiped Jesus, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (ESV).
- E. Very specifically, worship was humbling one’s self before God, prostrating themselves before Him to show His superiority and their inferiority because of fear, as they ascribed glory to God, exalting and praising Him. This is what God is seeking from us.

### III. True worshipers to worship Him in *spirit*...

- A. True worshiper worship God in spirit. But what does that mean?

1. I have long made a mistake when studying this verse. I have often viewed **John 4:23** as parallel to **John 4:21**. That is, I have often viewed these verses as saying, “When the true worshipers start worshipping in spirit, they will cease to worry about the mountain on which they worship.” That is not the case, however. Please consider a parallel structure in another set of passages. In **John 5:25; 28**, we see a similar structure. One passage speaks of an hour that is coming. One speaks of an hour that is coming and is already here. The hour that is coming is the hour of final judgment in which folks will be distributed to eternal life or eternal damnation. It was completely and totally in the future. On the other hand, the hour that was coming, and is now here, was the hour in which folks would listen to the Son of God and gain spiritual life. That, however, was not totally in the future. Consider **I Corinthians 10:4**. The Israelites had life in the days of Moses because they drank from the Rock which is Christ. Cross reference this with **John 6:53** which says we must eat and drink Jesus to have life and then notice that He was speaking figuratively to mean we must imbibe His words (**John 6:63**). The hour that was coming, and now is, had actually been in place for thousands of years. Since even the time of Moses, folks listened to the word of Christ to have life. This interesting construct however, is to demonstrate that the ultimate part of the plan was finally coming to fruition. There had been a sense in which folks had always gained life by listening to Christ, now it was going to happen fully.
  2. This same construction is used in **John 4:21, 23**. There is something whose hour is coming. There is something whose hour is coming and now is. Jesus said there was an hour coming in which the mountain wouldn’t matter. However, that time had not come at all yet. Even Jesus still worshiped at that mountain and makes it clear that was exactly what the woman should be doing because salvation was from the Jews. However, there was something whose hour was coming, and, in fact, whose hour had already come. That was the hour for worshipping in spirit and truth. The fact is, true worshipers have always worshiped in spirit and truth. I have heard this verse argued 100 different ways and I have yet to hear a position taken about what **vs. 23** means that has not always been true. Listen to anyone describe what they think it means to worship in spirit and truth and then search and see that the Israelites had just as much responsibility to worship that way as we do. Jesus’ point was not that one day when God required us to worship in spirit and truth then the mountain would no longer matter. His point was that because true worship is done in spirit and truth, we should not be surprised that the day was coming when the mountain and temple no longer mattered. Yet, the hour was coming because worshipping in spirit and truth would ultimately be fulfilled because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
- B. What we need to most understand is that the Old Testament was truly a period of progressive revelation. God was using a shadow to prepare people for the substance. Temple worship had never been God’s ultimate plan for worshipping Him. It was a stepping stone He used to help us understand the true worship. Jesus Himself really explained what worshipping in spirit means when He said, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit...” (**John 4:24—ESV**). God is not a corporeal being. We do not have to travel to Jerusalem to truly come into His presence. In fact, no one has ever truly had to do that. Keep in mind Solomon’s words when the temple was dedicated in **I Kings 8:27**. God never really dwelt in Jerusalem. It was a symbol, a shadow. However, while under that shadow, folks had to come to Jerusalem to sacrifice in order to be able to worship God. They had to come to God’s presence through the mediation of priests. Jesus’ sacrifice changed all of that. According to **Hebrews 9:11-14**, Jesus went into the true holy place of God and offered His own blood as the sacrifice that purifies our consciences from dead works. **Hebrews 10:19-22** explains that we have a great high priest by whose sacrifice we may come into the very holy place of God. Remember, we learned that worship is prostrating ourselves in the presence of God at His footstool? Under the Old Testament system, that meant traveling to Jerusalem to the Temple. However, under the New Testament, that means we can enter the holy presence of God any time, any place. We do not have to go to Jerusalem and offer a sacrifice to be able to worship God. Jesus has offered the sacrifice that allows us to worship and allows us to worship anywhere.
- C. While we will, no doubt, worship with the congregation. Worship is not confined to a church’s building. If we equate worship with “going to church,” then we are not worshipping in spirit. We

can worship God in our houses, in our cars, in the fields, on the street, at our jobs, in our schools. We can worship God anywhere because worship is about prostrating our spirit before the God who is spirit, before the God who is not confined by the material and corporeal. God is with us, so we can worship Him here in Franklin, TN, while others worship Him in South Africa or Russia. We do not have to pilgrimage to God's presence.

- D. Further, this indicates that worship is about our spirit, not our flesh. It is about prostrating our spirit before God, not about having our flesh entertained. Plays, interpretive dance, concerts, and other forms of entertainment are not worship. Eating is not worship. Pursuing the needs of our flesh is not worship. Worship is about our spirit, not our flesh. This also indicates that worship is not about merely going through the motions. It is not merely about lying on the floor. It is not merely about mouthing the words of a song or prayer. It is about having our spirit connect with God who is spirit. It is about having the center of our being, motivated with proper attitudes of fear and reverence, honoring God. Going through the physical motions is not worship. Having hearts attuned to God is worship.

#### IV. True worshipers to worship Him in spirit and *truth*.

- A. Finally, God is looking for true worshipers to worship Him in truth. According to **I John 3:18**, we are supposed to love in truth. According to **I John 3:19**, we are supposed to be of the truth. According to **III John 3**, we are supposed to walk in truth. According to **II John 2**, the truth is supposed to abide in us. Truth was very important to John's writing. He was very concerned with the lies of the Gnostics who did not accept that Jesus came in the flesh. The Gnostics claimed serving God was about gaining some kind of mystical knowledge that set them apart from everyone else. John explained that was not true. All they needed was to know the truth and practice that.
- B. According to **John 3:21**, those who do what is true (translating the same word as **John 4:23, 24**) come to the light and show that their works are carried out in God. The point being that we are to worship in God or according to God's will. Then **John 8:31-32** explains that we know the truth when we allow Jesus' words to abide in us. Further, that truth will set us free. Finally, **John 17:17** says we will be sanctified or set apart by the truth and that truth is God's word. Clearly, within the context of John's writing, worshipping in truth means worshipping according to God's word. It means worshipping God the way He has commanded and according to the patterns He has approved. As **II Timothy 3:16-17** says, the Scriptures equip us for every good work. They equip us to worship properly.

#### **Conclusion:**

God is seeking true worshipers who will worship Him in spirit and truth. If we are going to walk hand in hand with God our relationship must be founded on this. God is to be exalted. We are to be humbled. We must cast down our claims to worthiness and prostrate our spirits before Him, declaring Him to be superior, exalting Him, ascribing glory to Him. While we do this in our assemblies through prayers and songs, we must not wait until Sunday but worship God in this way every day. He deserves it. He is the true God, let us be true worshipers.