

WHO DO WE WORSHIP?

Who was your greatest childhood hero or teenage celebrity crush? What lengths did you go to to find out information about them? What can you still remember about them?

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Read Acts 17:22-34

Paul is upset by the worship of the Athenians, that they worship so many gods. What does he do to set them straight in his preaching?

Paul seems to think that it's very important that people know who God is. How important is a correct understanding of God for the way we worship? What can go wrong if we don't know God properly?

What incorrect ideas of God do you think we might encounter within our culture, both Christian and secular?

What things about God might we learn from Paul's message that might be important for us in how we worship God?

What other biblical truths about God would you also emphasise so that we can correctly worship God?

What steps can we take as a church to make sure we are worshipping God as he truly is? What can we do as individuals?

What is one truth about God that you are likely to neglect in your worship? What will remembering it change about how you worship?

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Leader's Notes Who do we Worship? Acts 17:22-34

Who was your greatest childhood hero or teenage celebrity crush? What lengths did you go to find out information about them? What can you still remember about them?

Today's study is about how a correct understanding of God will allow us to worship him properly. Often when we are interested in celebrity we try and find out correct information about them, and this fuels our interest. If we try and put the effort in to understand our heroes we should be even more willing to do the same so that we might be able to worship God properly.

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Paul is upset by the worship of the Athenians, that they worship so many gods. What does he do to set them straight in his preaching?

Paul uses his opportunity before the Areopagus to share with them the truth about who God is and what he is like. Paul has seen how religious they are but he knows that worship is not an end in itself. Worship only has value if you are worshipping the true God.

Paul takes the religion of the Athenians and uses it as a starting point for an explanation about who God is and what he has done. Paul makes reference to the "unknown god", a god the Athenians worshipped as a catchall to cover any gods they missed in their city full of idols. Paul tells them that he is going to show them this unknown god. Paul makes it clear that this unknown god is not just another god to be added to their roster of worship, but is the true God. The only true God who expects and deserves the worship of his creation. While all the other gods are created, God is the creator, while all the other gods need to be served, God does not need to be served by anyone, he is unrestricted by geographic boundaries, and it is he who determines the life and boundaries of humanity. This god is not unknown, but waiting to be found if only people would look for him.

In Paul's preaching he makes it clear that their worship is misdirected and needs to be corrected if they are to please the true God. Despite Paul's passionate preaching, the truth gets a mixed response. Paul has been faithful, it is up to the hearers to respond.

Paul seems to think that it's very important that people know who God is. How important is a correct understanding of God for the way we worship? What can go wrong if we don't know God properly?

A correct understanding of God is vital to proper worship. Having a distorted view of God will lead to distorted worship. The Athenians did not understand who God was and ended up worshipping many gods - none of which were the true God. Because of this they face the judgement of God (17:31). This is a dangerous situation to be in.

Similarly, incorrect knowledge of God doesn't just lead to bad information, but to bad action. Perhaps the starkest example of this in the Bible is the story of Jephthah and his Daughter (Judges 11:29-40). Jephthah vows to God that if he is victorious in battle, he will sacrifice whatever steps out of his door first when he returns home. On returning home it is his daughter, who walks out of his house first, that he chooses to sacrifice. Jephthah makes the mistake of believing that God must be coerced with vows, and that God would prefer that Jephthah kill his daughter rather than break a vow. Jephthah's understanding of God is no different to the local gods of the tribes surrounding Israel and it leads to him murdering his own daughter.

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While this is an extreme example it shows clearly how a distorted understanding of the character of God will lead to distorted worship.

In our culture this can play itself out in a number of ways. When we understand God as a god of works rather than grace, our worship will come from of a sense of obligation and duty rather than in joyful response to his love (Romans 12:1). Another example is seeing God as being primarily about loving humans rather than being about his glory. When this happens we will see worship as being for us rather than Him. We can see this often reflected in songs that are very individualistic and self-focused. This distortion of worship then reinforces our distorted view of God, which will further exacerbate our incorrect responses to and expectations of God.

The next question will look at where we might encounter these incorrect ideas about God.

What incorrect ideas of God do you think we might encounter within our culture, both Christian and secular?

Spend some time with your group discussing this question. It is difficult to get a comprehensive answer here, but I'll try and list a few significant ones below.

God is a tyrant - God is an angry god who can only be mollified by the service, obedience and worship of his creation. This view can be found in secular culture where he is often rejected because they are offended by this fear-inducing image of God. It can also be seen within the church as, out of fear, people seek to keep God happy with their behaviour lest he punish them. This view forgets that God's wrath has been satisfied at the cross and we are free to worship God out of love as we respond to the love that he has for us.

God is a kindly Grandfather - God is not concerned with our behaviour, he just wants to see us happy. This view is found in both secular culture and the church. In secular culture it leads to people ignoring God - being sure that if he is real, he loves them, he requires nothing of them and they'll be alright in the end. In the church this view leads to a minimisation of the seriousness of sin and sees God as primarily existing to serve us. This view forgets that at the cross we see how seriously God takes sin - Jesus was killed to pay for our sin. God requires his people to trust in his Son. Our trust will be shown in our obedience to him, not out of fear of punishment, but as a response his kindness. A saved life should lead to a changed life.

God is a wealthy benefactor - This view sees God, primarily, as the bestower of material wealth. This view is mostly (though not entirely) encountered within the church. In the church this view leads to greed and a distorted relationship with God where he is worshipped for the wealth he can bestow rather than who he is, what he has done and the relationship we can have with him. This view forgets that we already have every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3), we have forgiveness and eternal life. It also ignores that believers will still face trouble and hardship, and makes God's blessings primarily for the here and now - forgetting that God's blessings affect our past, our present and our future.

God is a social justice warrior - This view sees God, primarily, as a fighter for the rights of the poor and oppressed. We can see this view primarily in the church. In the church this view leads to a minimisation of the spiritual benefits of the gospel and reduces it to being almost entirely about the restructuring of society to address systemic injustice. While God is concerned with how we treat the poor and oppressed and the addressing of injustice, and the Bible makes clear he is a God who fights for the marginalised, we cannot reduce God only to this, or overemphasise this part of his character. If we do, we make a similar mistake to the "God is a wealthy benefactor" distortion, in that God's blessing and concern is mainly for this world. What we see in Christ is that there is hope for the poor, even if they do not receive earthly justice. What's more, this view can see wealth as a sin and poverty as a virtue, whereas the Bible does not delineate so simply. Sin and righteousness are not found in your wealth but in your rebellion against God and your faith in Jesus Christ.

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God is all spirit - This view sees God as being only about spiritual blessings who is unconcerned with earthly things. This view can be found in both secular society and the church. In society and in the church, this view reduces God to just spiritual issues - making worship of him only a personal and private matter. This view leads to Christians making no effort to reform society or fight for the rights of the oppressed, and views God as only existing to solve our spiritual woes. This view forgets that Jesus is a physical man, who came not only to save us from sin, but also to heal the sick, bring sight to the blind, set the oppressed free, proclaim freedom for the prisoner and good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). The new creation will be a physical one, like this current one, so we too must be concerned with bringing the kingdom to earth now.

There are obviously more distortions than these, and you may want to spend more time on them with your group.

Each of these distortions will lead to corruption of worship, both in Christian gatherings and the Christian's whole life of worship.

What things about God might we learn from Paul's message that might be important for us in how we worship God?

John Stott in his book "The Message of Acts" identifies five important characteristics of God that Paul makes clear in his speech. That God is creator (17:24), sustainer of life (17:25), ruler of the nations (17:26-28a), father of humanity (17:28b-29) and judge of the world (17:30-31). These five characteristics show God's all encompassing divinity and his total deserving of worship. He is the God above all other gods and when you understand that he is the creator, ruler, sustainer, father, and judge of all you cannot do anything but worship him. These are all truths that are important for us to know as we worship God. The greater our view of God and the more correctly we see him, the more we will be able to rightly love and serve him.

What other biblical truths about God would you also emphasise so that we can correctly worship God?

Many people have pointed out that Paul's speech neglects to outline the event and effects of Jesus' death on the cross. However other commentators make the point that this is probably an abridged version of Paul's speech and that Paul does talk about Jesus' resurrection which would lead us to believe that he did also speak of Jesus' death, because how can you be resurrected if you did not die? However what this does remind us is that we would probably want to emphasise God's saving work for us at the cross, so that our worship might be informed by God's kindness to us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

See if your group has any other truths about God that are important to them in their worship.

What steps can we take as a church to make sure we are worshipping God as he truly is? What can we do as individuals?

To worship God as he truly is means knowing God as he truly is. We cannot know God unless he reveals himself to us. He has done this through his Son and through his word.

Jesus is God, and as such, he is the fullest revelation of God available to us. We meet Jesus in the words of scripture which is brought to life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture, as well as showing us Jesus, shows us many other ways that God has spoken and worked over time, and what God commands his people to do. We must be spending time prayerfully reading and studying the Bible so that we might know God.

We must also make sure that our worship conforms to these revealed truths. This means that in our times together as Christians our singing, prayer, teaching and encouraging should all reflect the Biblical view of God. We should make sure that what we do does not over-emphasise (or ignore) one or a few aspects of his character.

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In the rest of our lives we should consider our actions in light of God's character asking "If this is worship, what aspect of his character is this responding to and reflecting?" Where our actions are incompatible with what we know of God we should change how we behave so that our worship might be a response to God's revealed person.

What is one truth about God that you are likely to neglect in your worship? What will remembering it change about how you worship?

This is a question for personal reflection. Challenge the group to think carefully so that their worship might be in keeping with the true character of God.

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Spend some time in prayer in repentance for worshipping a distorted view of God. Ask that he might reveal himself through his word and his Spirit.