

The Overflowing Life – Part 2

Worship: Responding to God's Overflow

Romans 12:1-2

January 29, 2006

I grew up with four sisters and two brothers and every Sunday morning we packed into our Chevy station wagon and drove to church for a worship service. I hated the worship services. I didn't like the sermon, or the music or the musty smells. Actually, the only thing that held my attention was waiting for my younger brother Dave to faint. He fainted often, especially during the months of July and August. My older brother Steve and I watched it coming because Dave would start to weave and wobble. Then Steve and I would look at each other and smile as we eagerly waited for Dave to lean too far forward, crashing into the pew right in front of him. It kept me alert until the end of the service when we would race out the door and tear out of the crowded church parking lot.

So as I was growing up, my experiences at worship services led me to conclude: (1) Worship is dull; (2) Worship occurs once a week for an hour in a church building; (3) Worship does not make you a better person (spending your whole time waiting for your younger brother to faint is not nice); (4) Nobody else likes worship – that's why we had to dash to our station wagon and beat the other guys to their station wagons. So I decided that worship services weren't for me.

Obviously, I look at worship much differently now (otherwise I probably wouldn't be up here, would I?). There is so much more to worship than just watching your brother faint or enduring to the end so you can dash out the door. According to the Bible, what is worship? What does it have to do with the overflowing life and experiencing God's generosity?

To begin with we need to confront a startling fact in the New Testament: it contains almost no specific instructions dealing with corporate worship services. We know a number of things about these services (see Acts 2:42-47 for example), but it does not tell us how long the service should last, or what constitutes a good sermon, or whether we should sing hymns or choruses, and if so, how many we should sing and how often we should repeat them, or whether we should use spontaneous prayers or written prayers. So we have to proceed with caution when it comes to specific forms of worship. However, having said that, these two verses give us three foundational truths - which are actually more like spiritual disciplines or holy habits about worship.

First, worship is always a response to God's outpouring for us in Christ Jesus. Last week I talked about the Outpouring of God (see 2 Corinthians 8:9 – “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, although he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich”). God is the most generous giver in the universe. One of the most startling verses in the Bible (and in the history of world religions) is John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son...” For God so loved *that he gave*. Wait a minute. I thought religion was all about what I do for God and what I do for others or the church. Isn't that what I heard growing up - give Jesus

your heart or give money to the church or give your life for the mission field? Your job is to give and God's job is to take away. In this arrangement, God always subtracts from my life. God is always a looming threat to my happiness. Who would want to serve or love a god like that? But the God of our Lord Jesus Christ says, "No, that's not who I am. I loved and I gave. I poured myself out in creation. But more than anything, I poured myself out in Jesus who lived and died for you." So worship begins and continues right here: God gives; God pours out; God serves us. We take and drink and find our satisfaction in God. That is worship: "God is worshipped when we cherish God above all things and then we come to tell God that and to find more of God" (John Piper).

That's where the New Testament starts with worship. Notice verse 1 says, "Therefore, I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercies..." Now keep in mind that as we read this verse it's like walking into a movie when it's half over. Or for those of you who are fans of the TV series "24" or "Lost" it's like walking in on episode 9. Someone has to summarize the events of Episodes 1-8 because you've missed important, crucial events. So Paul begins with "therefore" which points to the big events that have already happened. And the theme of chapters 1-11 is "the mercies of God." We were in big trouble (see Romans 3:23 and 6:23 and 11:32). But God had mercy on us, and now the good news is this: yes, we were in trouble, but God stepped into our world and took our place. He died the death we should have died and lived the life we should have lived – and now we are "in him." (So see Romans 8:31-39).

Do you see how it is all a response? As we'll see next week this passage is filled with mercy and as we worship God we become merciful people. But as God pours out, we, first of all, receive. We trust, we rest, we delight, we savor, we take in, and we feast. We stand under the outpouring of the riches of God's grace that have been lavished on us (see Ephesians 1:7-8). Then every little part of our lives, including the little parts of our worship services, are tiny and tainted attempts to respond to God's outpouring by pouring back to God and for God. (See the Scriptural images for pouring in the Old Testament sacrifices, the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:17 and 2 Timothy 4:6). Pouring is a good image because when I pour something (demonstrate) it implies lavishness, overflow, generosity. When I pour something I give it up and let it go. It's much richer than dripping.

We will pour out our lives on something or someone. Harold Best, formerly at Wheaton College, calls this the one fundamental fact about worship: "At this very moment, and for as long as this world endures, everybody inhabiting it is bowing down and serving something or someone ... We are, every one of us, unceasing worshippers and will remain so forever." Or as Bob Dylan used to sing, "You gotta serve somebody." The Bible points us in the right direction by saying, "Pour your worship on the most worthy, the most awesome, and the most beautiful focus of worship – God."

How do we pour back to God? Well, the second truth/spiritual discipline is that we worship with full-body engagement. Paul says, "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices." Now isn't that interesting? It starts with your body. We usually think, "Well, I have to try real hard to get myself in a 'spiritual' frame of mind because God wants my spiritual

life.” God wants you to offer your body. Your body is important to God. We seem to live in a culture that is very body-conscious, many are even filled with body-hatred. Why would God – who is holy and perfect – want my body, which is flawed and imperfect? You might say, “My body is overweight, wrinkled, achy, unattractive or brittle. My hair line is receding or my stomach is protruding – or both.” And yet here God says that offering my body is “a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” In the Old Testament you could only bring a flawless animal to offer up to God. But our bodies are riddled with flaws.

But the New Testament teaches that every act of worship, every good deed, every act of devotion is offered “through Jesus Christ” – and that makes it acceptable to God. The essence of our worship – and all of Christian spirituality – is found in these two words: through Jesus. So, for instance, Hebrews 13:15 says, “Through Jesus, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise ... for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” The key is that our worship is offered “through Jesus.” He makes it acceptable to God the Father. So banish the thought that your body – or anything else about your life – will find acceptance before God on your own. No, you are acceptable because of Jesus Christ. That’s the whole plot of Romans 1-11. God accepts all of you – with all your flaws and all your sins – through Jesus Christ.

As a side note: Do you see how this could transform the diseases that are ravaging our culture – anorexia nervosa, bulimia and just a low body-image? God accepts us through Jesus – body and all. “We should ask for God’s perspective on bodies to become imbedded deep in our sons and our daughters – and ourselves – as one very powerful antidote to all kinds of eating disorders that plague so many young women, and even now some men” (John Piper).

But, first and foremost, this is revolutionary to our worship life because offering our bodies is a “living sacrifice.” Now this is strange because up to this point in history no one had heard of a “living sacrifice.” In order to sacrifice an animal or even a plant, you had to kill it. The formula was: no death, no sacrifice; no sacrifice, no worship. So you killed your offering, did the “worship thing” and then you went home. Your worship was over, complete, final, now you could go home and get on with your life.” Some people still look at worship services that way. I show up, I sing a few songs, put some money in the plate, and try to pay attention during the sermon. But then, finally, the service ends and my day can begin. My worship requirement has been fulfilled.

That’s not worship. The revolutionary idea presented here is to “offer your bodies as *living sacrifices*, holy and acceptable to God – which is your spiritual worship.” What’s a living sacrifice? That means that this sacrifice is alive. Which means: as long as you’re alive, as long as you have a body – any kind or shape – you are invited to respond to God’s mercy, to receive God’s outpouring, and respond by soaking it in and then pouring it back. Three times in chapter 6 Paul invites (see Romans 6:13, 16, 19) us to present the members or parts of our bodies to God as “instruments of righteousness.” What are the members of our bodies? Well, you don’t have to spiritualize or intellectualize it; he’s talking about the parts of your body: your eyes, ears, mouth, nose, skin, arms, red blood

cells, DNA, legs, sexual organs, kidneys, head, face, lips and tongue. Every day, every hour, every minute, you take those body parts and offer them to God as a living sacrifice. So this sacrifice is not a thing outside of us; it's us, all of us. And it isn't just the "spiritual" part of us; it's the "us" that moves and feels and smells and works with our hands and our feet and speaks with our voice.

So do you see how exciting and all-pervasive real worship is? Do you see that you are always worshipping? The New Testament is saying, "Let every act of your body be an act of worship, declaring that God is your treasure, that Christ is alive in you." And this can happen anywhere and anytime with anyone (See Story of Charles Wesley).

As long as you have a body, you are worshipping. And wherever that body happens to be, that is your place of worship. How would this change our worship on Sunday mornings, our worship services? Sunday morning isn't "catch-up" time. It's just part of the week-long continuum of worship. It's a corporate summation of everything we should be doing during the week. We don't come to church to worship; we come to give synergized, corporate, diverse voice to the worship that we've already been immersed in during the week. And when we leave, we don't stop worshipping; we just move to the next location of worship – our kitchen, our campus, our school and our jobs. So the carpenter, the chef, the nurse, the doctor, the regional manager, the lawyer, the housewife, the school volunteer, the garbage collector – they just keep worshipping at a new location.

Third, real worship, our outpouring back to and in and through God, also involves our full-heart engagement. Note verse 2 – "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." In other words, devote your whole life, pour yourself out, eat-live-drink this one reality: be changed by Christ. Be transformed – the Greek word is metamorphosis. It is in the present tense continual, which means, don't stop, don't coast, and don't think that you've arrived. How does this happen? How do we allow God to change us as we worship Him? Worship is right "bodying"; it's also right valuing. The word Paul uses here is so rich and deep that it requires two English words to capture it - test and approve. It had to do with the process of testing and valuing real gold. Of course only a dolt would just test gold; you also value it. So worship involves not just right thinking; it involves our full-hearted valuing. What do you treasure? Where is your heart? Where is your treasure?

In other words, real worship that leads to deep renewal and transformation, involves a deep, spiritual change in how we value things. It involves spiritual tasting ("Taste and see that the Lord is good" – Psalm 34:8) and spiritual delight ("Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" – Psalm 37:3) and spiritual sweetness ("One thing I have asked from the Lord, one thing do I seek ... to enjoy the sweetness of the Lord" – Psalm 27:4).

You see, most of what we do every day we do without extended analysis and logic. We just act spontaneously out of what we value and delight in. Or as Jesus said, we act out of what fills the "abundance of our heart" (Matthew 12:34). So the real essence of our

life of worship is dying to old delights and treasures and sweets and coming alive to God's delights and treasures and sweetness. So our spiritual worship is coming to God every day and saying, "God, you are my treasure. You are my ultimate delight – you are the source of everything in this world that is truly and lastingly delightful. I want to find my satisfaction in you because you are the Quencher of every thirst."

Real worship engages the heart, causing our emotions and our affections to come alive to God. It's so much more than just fulfilling a duty. I love the way John Piper says this, "Worship is a way of gladly reflecting back to God the radiance of His worth." For instance, if I came to my wife with a dozen roses and said, "Here, Julie, these are for you." And she said, "O my goodness, what a surprise ... for me? You shouldn't have." And if I said, "Yea, yea, well, I had to do it, you know. It's my duty." Now how does my wife feel? Of course she wants my heart engaged. She is honored when I delight in her. She wants the flowers to come out of a deeper delighting and treasuring. That's what the Bible means when it says, "Delight yourself in the Lord" (Psalm 37:4) and "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4). Worship begins with God pouring and lavishing His grace on us. Then we respond by lavishing back on God. Compared to God's pure and lavish pouring, our pouring is a tainted, tiny pouring – more like a drip than a pour, but it's a start in the right direction.

There is pleasure and sweetness and delight in real worship that flows from our heart. I can't create it in you. You have to bring it here on Sunday morning and into your small groups and your school and where you work. John Piper said, "For many Christianity has become the grinding out of doctrinal laws from collections of biblical facts. But childlike wonder and awe have died. The scenery and poetry and music of the majesty and wonder of God, the generosity of God's outpouring love, have dried up like a forgotten peach at the back of the refrigerator."

Conclusion: Is your body engaged in worship? Do you have a body that worships? Think through your day: what does your body do all day? Are you worshipping? Are you offering your body and its members as instruments of righteousness? Do you bring that spirit into our corporate worship services? If you don't, you might be too needy. It's like not eating all week and then you come to someone's house for dinner knowing it will be your only meal for another whole week. You're starving and you'll expect far too much from that single meal. Instead, all week long are you moving around and saying with the apostle Paul – wherever you are, whatever you do – "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21 and Galatians 2:20).

Is your heart engaged in worship? What is your treasure – or what is in the treasure chest of your heart? What's it filled with – what kind of trinkets clutter your heart? Can you truly say, "I delight in God"? Have you truly responded to God's invitation: "Taste and see that the Lord is good"? Or has God lost his flavor for you? Are you gorged with junk food that has nothing to do with God?

Romans 12:1.