

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament  
F. The Creator-Creature Distinction  
18. Worship and the Works of Faith

In the last two lectures we've been looking at one of the foundational truths of Scripture: the Creator/creature distinction. God is the author of the whole of Creation, and people, along with plants and animals and inanimate things are his creatures. What follows seems almost too obvious to have to emphasize: God is sovereign over his creation, and every part of it depends moment by moment on its Creator for the ability to exist and function.

Most of creation has no problem with this arrangement. The air and dirt and planets and other lifeless stuff of the universe, as well as all of its sub-human forms of life are neither inclined nor equipped to disobey their Creator. Humans, on the other hand, often give in to the fantasy that the Creator/creature distinction is not such a big deal, after all, and that they can, as the serpent tempted Eve, become like God.

We cannot become like God. And every rebellion against the God-established order results, sooner or later, in chaos and death. God will never give up his position as Sovereign or slack off on his providential care for the works of his hands. And humans can flourish only as we recognize our continuing dependence on our creator. In fact, it is the acknowledgement of who God is and who we are that both gives God the credit and honor he deserves and enables us to give him the service for which we were created. Giving God credit and honor we call worship, and the service God intends we call engaging in works of faith.

Scripture often speaks of our call to worship or "fear" the Lord. These reminders are necessary in view of all the alternative claimants to the worship owed God. In the Exodus story it was Egypt's Pharaoh who demanded Israel's worship and service. But God conclusively demonstrated his right to what Pharaoh demanded by freeing his people from Egypt and demolishing the opposition. After that, however, God's people were constantly tempted to give their worship and service to one or more of the false gods of their neighboring nations or to try to worship the Lord with the use of images.

God specifically addressed both of those matters in the Ten Commandments. The first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" forbade service to any other god. And the second: "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" forbade the use of idols or images, even if the intention in using them was to worship the Lord.

An example of Israel's violation of the first commandment was their worship of the Canaanite fertility gods, Baal and Asherah, in the time of Ahab and Elijah. An example of Israel's violation of the second commandment was their attempt, shortly after their deliverance from Egypt, to worship the Lord by means of the golden calves Aaron made.

But it must be noted that Israel also failed to give God the worship he desired and commanded when they obeyed the letter of God's law but without their hearts in their worship. Listen to Moses in Deut. 10:12-13. *And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?*

This makes clear that the worship God wants is not superficial; it is a matter of the heart. Isaiah 29:13 describes people whose worship of God was not a matter of the heart: *"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.*

Maybe the people Isaiah described supposed that God's actions could be programmed by their own rule-keeping, so that if they gave him a sacrifice he was bound to give them what they wanted. If so, they were very much like pagan idol worshippers, who thought that by the right actions they could force their gods to do their bidding. What's more likely however, is that their hearts weren't in their worship. Religion for them had become little more than the habit of keeping a certain set of rules. And they had no problem using these rules to judge other people and try to keep them under control.

So Scripture is very clear that the call to worship God cannot be satisfied merely by keeping the rules but is a matter demanding one's whole attention and energy and personality. Worship, as Jesus would instruct the Samaritan woman on another occasion, is a matter of Spirit and truth. It is worship of the heart. This doesn't mean that outward actions are unimportant. It only means that it's not enough to worship outwardly. Our outward worship must reflect the inmost desires of our hearts, which, of course, cannot be seen, even though they do sometimes have a way of exposing themselves. But even if I can fool you, and you can fool me, neither of us can fool God; he knows what we think of him, and he knows our deepest desires.

The actions of worship must be accompanied by what Jonathan Edwards called heat in the heart. Listen to some of the feelings or affections displayed in the inspired psalms and hymns of the Old Testament.

- Perhaps the first response of the heart at seeing the majestic holiness of God is stunned silence. *Be still, and know that I am God!* (Ps 46:10).
- And in the silence rises a sense of awe and reverence and wonder at the sheer magnitude of God. *Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him* (Ps 33:8).
- And because we're all sinners there is in our reverence a holy dread of God's righteous power. *The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread* (Isa 8:13).
- But this dread is not a paralyzing fright full of resentment against God's absolute authority; it finds release in brokenness and grief for our ungodliness. *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise* (Ps 51:17).
- Mingled with the feeling of genuine brokenness and contrition there arises a longing for God. *Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever* (Ps 73:25-26).
- God is responsive to the longing of our souls. He comes and lifts the load of sin and fills our hearts with gladness and gratitude. *You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever* (Ps 30:11-12).
- In the end the heart longs not as much for any of God's good gifts, as for God himself. To see him and know him and be in his presence is the best thing in all the world. Beyond this there is nothing more to discover. *You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand* (Ps 16:11).

These are some of the affections of the heart that keep worship from being *in vain*. Worship of the heart is a way of gladly reflecting back to God the radiance of his worth. It is not a mere act of willpower by which we perform the outward acts of worship as if duty-bound to do so. True worship is rather the engagement of the heart, the coming alive of the feelings, emotions and affections of the heart. Because, get this: *Where feelings for God are dead, worship is dead.*

What this means is that worship is an end in itself, and not simply to be engaged in as a means to something we want in our lives. Inasmuch as we worship merely because we think it's a way to keep our parents happy, or our spouse happy, or because it's good for our children, or even ourselves, we can't worship. All of these things may be true, but real worship involves true emotion that rises from our hearts over the amazing grace and worth of God.

Such worship cannot be confined to one day a week or even a portion of each day. It must spill over into works of faith—into a life of service to the one we worship. This is what God had in mind from the very beginning when he said (cf. Gen 1:26-28): *“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

God's mandate gives mankind responsibility and permission to use and develop the creation. According to some people, that's where God went wrong. The argument goes something like this: Christians think they have God's blessing to do whatever they want in the development of technology and culture, and the Christian nations have done so with little regard to the effects of their actions on other peoples or cultures, on the earth as a whole, or on future generations.

There can be little doubt that there is much misuse of created things in our world, and that this has often happened in Christianized nations. But the philosophy that says that people are free to do whatever their hearts desire, and without regard to consequences to other people or creatures, is not Christian but heresy—the perversion of the God-given mandate to rule having been misused so that it has come to mean something entirely different from what God intended. God's intention, after all, was never to have men and women usurp his place as rightful Lord of creation, but to have them be his servants in developing the potential that he built in to his world.

Contrary to the view of radical environmentalists, this is not a matter merely of returning as much of the world as possible to wilderness. It is a matter of using the resources of creation responsibly and with care for future generations. This is not anti-development but pro responsible development. Nor is this merely a matter to concern only those in positions of power. God values each individual response. That means being as responsible as we can be, but also seeking to increase our effectiveness as people aware of and responsible for, all of the gifts of God.

Other aspects of stewardship bear mention too:

- Parents are stewards of their children and will have to answer for how well they've fulfilled their responsibilities. And sometimes, children, in turn, become responsible for aging parents and will have to answer for their stewardship in that role.

- Members of the Body of Christ bear some responsibility for each other—for mutual love and support, and sometimes discipline to call a wayward brother or sister back to obedient living.
- We are stewards of justice in society to the extent that we have a voice in such matters. And all of us do, insofar as our personal actions are concerned. And as we are able, we must also do our best to promote public policies that treat people fairly.
- As Christians we bear certain stewardship responsibilities for those who do not know the Lord. God expects us to share our faith as we have opportunity, even with those whom we may deem highly unlikely to repent and turn to God. For we are not the best judge in such matters, and God can do anything he wants.
- And, of course, stewardship also involves the use of our material resources. You may have worked hard for the money you call your own. But where did you get the intelligence and initiative and even the job you have? Prosperity, when it does not come by exploitation, is a sign of God's grace, but it also tempts God's people to behave in unsteadwardly ways. In many ways prosperity has seduced and paralyzed the church. But let no Christian say about costly clothing and extravagant lifestyle: "How I dress and spend my money is no one's business but my own." You must defend your lifestyle before the one who owns the whole world and everything in it.

"What do you have that you did not receive?" That a rhetorical point the apostle Paul made to the Christians in Corinth (1 Cor. 4:7). It means that all that we are and have we owe to God and so we must not forget our accountability for how we use all that God has trusted us with including our time.

Evangelist Juan Carlos Ortiz puts it like this: "Sometimes a Christian says to himself, 'Well, now that I'm finished working for the day, I'll go home and take a shower. Then I'll watch television for a while, and then I'll go to bed. Yes, I know there's a meeting tonight, but after all, I'm entitled to a little rest.'"

But you are entitled to nothing, You are a slave, bought by Jesus Christ, and he owns all the hours of your day. "We are all upside down. The lords sit in the pews. We treat Jesus as if he were our slave. We pray, "Lord" (but our attitude is the opposite), "I'm leaving now. Please watch the house so that no one breaks in while I'm gone. And please keep me from an accident while I drive."

There's no doubt that God wants his children to ask him for things. But such requests presuppose a proper relationship. God's children are servants who try to please him in everything they do. So servants spend most of their time praying, "Lord, what do you want me to do." And the things they ask for are so that they can accomplish their jobs. Their satisfaction comes in doing the will of God.

"Wait a minute," you say. "If my time is God's, does that mean I don't get any time to myself?" That's right; that's what it means. You don't get a vacation from being the servant, the slave of Jesus Christ.

"But does it mean I don't get any time for recreation?" No, it doesn't mean that, unless Jesus Christ does not come along on your recreation outings. You see, the issue is one of taking care of what God owns. If you overwork, then you are not being a good steward of your health, or probably of your family; to do that you need time to think, time to be energized, and recreation can be part of such a process.

Does your lifestyle show that you are God's steward? Are you watching and hoping for opportunities to serve God, or running away from them, hoping for some privacy? Slaves are not allowed to say "No" to their Master's requests or orders. And you are not allowed to answer "No" to a request for something that you know God needs done, unless you're doing something that has a higher priority. That doesn't mean you'll be spending all of your time doing church work, any more than you give all your money in the collection plate and save none for groceries or rent. No, you might spend time playing with your children, or taking a nap, or shoveling snow, or working overtime. And you will spend a good part of your money on rather ordinary things. All your activities and all your expenditures are legitimate if they are part of your service to God. But when they become excuses for avoiding service, when they become self-centered, then you are not being a good steward.

Stewards know that everything finds its origin and meaning in Jesus Christ. As Col 1:16,17 says: "For by him (Jesus Christ) all things were created...all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Everything; all of God's purposes, all of created reality, everything in the universe.

Stewards remember Ps 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." Stewards remember that his glory is supposed to fill the earth, (Num 14:21). Stewards remember that they are supposed to represent God's good reign over the earth so that all his creatures might bow before him and praise him (cf. Stek Banner 3/12/90). Stewards remember that they are to care for and adorn God's visible glory robe, i.e. this world with all its potential. They worship the Lord with all their hearts and care for everything God has given them responsibility for—the world, other people, their time, their money, their opportunities, so that no one in all creation can say, 'I have seen no sign of God.'" And so that God will say to them in the end: "Well done, good and faithful servant; come in and make yourself at home."