

Making Sure We Worship God and Not People

Several years ago, I was in Starbucks working on a sermon while listening to a long playlist of songs by Whitney Houston. Whitney was one of the greatest vocalists the world has ever known, but listening to her music years after her tragic death was overwhelmingly sad, especially "The Greatest Love of All." She confidently and beautifully sang, "Learning to love yourself, it is the greatest love of all." If you know the details of her life, you'll know that Whitney never did learn to accept herself the way God made her. For my part, I think we helped destroy her by worshiping her instead of the God who made her and gave her that wonderful voice!

We are worshipers. We can't help it. We need to put someone or something high on a pedestal for worship. It's wired deeply into the fabric of our being by the God who made us for Himself. Our sinful nature denies God the worship he is due, but it cannot suppress our worship instinct, it can only re-direct it. It can only misdirect it. When it does, it generates an endless appetite for idolatry, destroying both us and our idols.

The long list of destroyed idols in America is as tragic as it is endless: Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Britney Spears, Mike Tyson, Anthony Bourdain, Michael Jackson, Prince, Justin Bieber, Bruce Jenner, the Kardashians, Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, and many more. We talk about the "tortured artist," but perhaps we need to speak about the "tortured idols." It's not without good cause that the most famous star-making show in America for years was called "American Idol."

Hear me clearly: I'm not judging these people. It's our fault for worshiping them. Neither can I simply point the finger at the world, for we do the same thing in the church with our celebrity pastors. Several years ago, pastors John Piper and C.J. Mahaney both had to step down and take leaves of absence for being prideful. Who wouldn't be prideful if they were elevated and praised as much as those men were? I don't even need to make a list of the celebrity preachers who fell into grievous sin and crashed hard from the pedestal we placed them on.

The fallen world has always worshiped idols, and they always will, until Jesus comes again. But the church should know better!

Here's what we need to do: Stop worshiping people! I know that's easier said than done. Sometimes we just can't help it. We admire someone. We've been so blessed by their artistry or their ministry. We've been so inspired and affected by their gifts in one way or another. But we MUST recognize the rising feeling of awe and wonder in our souls as worship. We must repent of that idol-worship, and we must redirect that worship to God.

I'm a pastor, and I've spoken in front of people hundreds of times in my life. I know how good it can feel to have people looking up to you, hanging on your every word. I know how tempting it is to stop loving people and start needing them instead. I know how easily we can slip from serving others out of love for God to using others to serve our own egos. It's a dangerous and deadly drug, and it can leave you feeling so cast down after the rush is over that you look for something else to scratch that itch. I think that's why many pastors struggle with internet porn.

So, here's what we *all* need to do: Worship God! We need to begin each day looking to the Lord, acknowledging our dependence on Him and His Lordship over me. We need to be broken in worship before Him before we can effectively serve others in love in His name.

Here's some practical advice for how we might, by God's grace, turn away from worshipping others and back to worshipping Him:

1. If you love reading Christian books more than reading the Bible, especially books by a particular Christian author (because you just *love* the way they write!), take a break from reading their books for a while. Begin your day with a healthy dose of Bible reading.
2. Pray for pastors and church leaders instead of praising them. You can thank your pastor for preaching God's Word, but also let him know you're praying for him, and then make sure you do faithfully pray for him, daily.
3. Pastors: Make sure your elders and fellow church leaders have the freedom to hold you accountable if you start acting like an egomaniac. Don't assume you won't; assume you will. Tell your elders or church leaders to directly confront you if you start acting prideful, and make sure you are ready to receive their counsel. If you serve as a lay elder or church leader, you have a responsibility to Christ to guard His flock from power-hungry, self-driven men!
4. In worship, if you find yourself half-hearted in singing and praying, just waiting for the message - showing up late, checking your phone, not singing, etc. - check yourself and repent. You are in church to worship God, not to hear a message from your favorite speaker.
5. If you're tempted to skip church because your pastor is away and a substitute will be preaching, don't do it. Make sure you attend! Again, you go to church to worship the Lord and hear from His word, not to hear an interesting talk from a powerful speaker.
6. We need to make sure our worship services are covenant encounters with the living God, and not just a rock concert followed by a motivational speaker. The more churches adopt entertainment-driven models of worship - stage lighting, smoke, performance worship, etc. - the more we are making the people on stage into "American Idols." Covenantal worship is a dialogue between God and His people, not a show for an audience.
7. We should probably have a mental list of the people we're tempted to worship and regularly pray for them, thank God for them, and ask God to check our hearts against idolatry.

We belong to one God, He who created us and redeemed us at the highest price. Let us worship Him alone!

*Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!*

Why should the nations say,

*“Where is their God?”
Our God is in the heavens;
he does all that he pleases.*

*Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.
Those who make them become like them;
so do all who trust in them.*

- Psalm 115:1-18, ESV

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

- Hebrews 12:28-29, ESV