

WE HAVE COME TO WORSHIP HIM

Matthew 2:1–12

Key Verse: 2:2

“...saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’”

Happy New Year! And Happy Epiphany Sunday! It’s the day Christians around the world celebrate the visit of the wise men to worship Jesus as God’s hope for the Gentile world. In terms of world mission, it’s a great Christian holiday. The Greek root in “epiphany” is the same as in the word “manifest,” which we heard at our Christmas service. God made his love “manifest” in sending his only Son (1 John 4:9). In English, to “have an epiphany” means to “have a lightbulb moment,” to see something we didn’t see before. Today’s topic is worship, and we all probably need an epiphany about our own worship.

As we know, at this time of year it’s popular to make new year resolutions. According to a recent Yahoo! survey, the top resolutions for 2024 that Americans are making are, in order: 1) improving one’s finances; 2) fitness; 3) diet; 4) mental health; and 5) relationships. Sounds pretty good. These resolutions are all about self-improvement, and they assume we can get better through self-discipline. But if we think about it, that’s a lot of *self*. As Christians, we’re called to turn away from self to *the living God*. So, as our first study for the new year we’d like to learn this morning about worship. We don’t want to make new year resolutions that merely promise not to miss a Sunday service, or even to always come early and never be late, though those are really good things to do. In this new year we want to ask God to help us grow as true worshipers of God.

Where can we learn about real worship? Many places in the Bible mention it. But Matthew is a good place to start. We may not have noticed it, but Matthew uses the word “worship” more than any other Gospel writer. And only Matthew records the worship of these wise men. Matthew was keenly aware of the pitfalls of Judaism. He knew firsthand its racism, exclusivism, moralism, self-righteous pretense, and artificial worship. In his day, their religious leaders had developed an elaborate system of strict traditions to make themselves holy. In Matthew 15, quoting Isaiah, Jesus rebuked them, saying, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (15:7–9). We won’t get into all of this here. But Jesus is teaching us a central principle of worship. Worship is not about saying or singing or knowing all the right things, or keeping strict rules. Worship is about what’s in our heart. Often, we don’t even know what’s going on in there (Jer.17:9). But our heart is the only place where real worship starts.

And in today's passage we notice that the real worshipers are not any of the so-called religious people in Israel; they're *foreigners*, who came from far away. Their arrival was shocking. Nobody told *them* to come. Outwardly these men seemed *unlikely* to be interested in worship. But in them we can see the *spirit* of authentic worship. Today let's ask God to help us learn what the spirit of worship is, and show us what's going on in our own hearts that's keeping us from it. May God speak to us through his word.

Look at verse 1a. "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king..." Though he's known as Jesus of Nazareth, in Galilee, Jesus was actually *born* in Bethlehem of *Judea*. Unlike Luke, Matthew doesn't tell us how Jesus got there. He just says Bethlehem was in Judea, and repeats "Judea" or "Judah" four times. Genesis 49:10 says, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." Jesus being born in Judea shows that our Sovereign God was ruling history and keeping all his promises.

Next, Matthew reminds us that this happened "in the days of Herod the king." What kind of days were they? To understand, we've got to know the kind of person Herod was. Actually, Herod wasn't born into a royal family. He wasn't even fully Jewish. Though raised in Judaism, ethnically he descended from Esau. It was the Roman occupiers who made him king. History calls him "Herod the Great." He was an able administrator and great builder. He even began rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. But people still saw him as an illegitimate king. As he got old, Herod developed a terrible illness that added to his paranoia. He even had his favorite wife and two sons murdered. Later, he became famous for murdering all the little boys born in Bethlehem. So "the days of Herod the king" was a scary time in Israel's history.

But even in such dark times, something wonderful happened. Look at verse 1b. "...behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem..." Here, "the east" is most likely Babylon—about a thousand miles away. On foot, this trip could take weeks, even months. These "wise men" were scholars who studied ancient manuscripts and the stars. Some were known as charlatans. But these guys were legit, really searching for truth. Look at verse 2. "...saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'" They had no idea their question would freak out King Herod. They were just so *genuine*. They assumed everybody would be celebrating the new king's birth. But when they got there, no one was celebrating.

How did they know about this king's birth? It says, "we saw his star when it rose." Ancient Babylon was far ahead of the world in its astrological expertise.

Because these men were professional star-gazers, one night they spotted a certain star. How they knew this star signaled the birth of the king of the Jews is a mystery. But there's an Old Testament prophecy about this star. Interestingly, it's in an oracle from another foreign "wise man" from the Babylonian area, whose name was Balaam. Balaam said: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel..." (Num.24:17a). The Babylonians had access to the Old Testament Scriptures ever since the Jews had been exiled there for 70 years. These wise men must have learned ancient Hebrew and carefully poured over the Hebrew Scriptures until they got the point: God promised a Messiah to come through the Jews, who would be king of all the people of the world. This hope became the hope of these wise men. In other words, through sincere Bible study, God's hope in Jesus came into their hearts. Such Bible study is what inspired their worship. Because they had this hope, their worship was not a duty; they were excited, *thrilled* to do it.

And the wise men took action. When the star appeared, God gave them the conviction that the promised king had been born. It inspired them to come see him. They dropped everything to make the arduous trek. They made it their top priority. They put their scholarly publications on hold, paused their research, and prepared all they needed to travel. It wasn't convenient, but to them that was no matter. They didn't calculate the cost. And they didn't stop along the way or get sidetracked. In our age of comfort and ease, self-preservation, and so many distractions, these wise men put us all to shame. But it wasn't just their driven ambition or self-discipline. Like them, our hearts gain the real spirit of worship when we take action on God's word and make Jesus our first priority.

In the last part of verse 2 they say, "...we have come to worship him." A very clear, very bold statement. In this passage the word "worship" is repeated three times. The Greek word literally means to "kiss" or to "adore." It's not just a formal gesture; it requires one's affections, one's heart. Are we really using our hearts to worship Jesus? Are we coming to adore him, to just appreciate who he is and what his coming means to us? According to Strong's Bible Dictionary, people in the wise men's culture had a specific way of expressing such "worship." They would fall on their knees, bow all the way to the ground to touch it with their forehead, then kiss the feet or the hem of the person they were honoring. Again, all this expressed their hearts. For most of us, it's unthinkable to bow and kiss somebody's feet like this. But the spirit of worship includes such *humility* and such *affection* for the one being worshiped.

Many self-sufficient people say, "I worship no one and nothing. I just take care of myself." But actually, God made us all to worship. Even those who seem not to be worshipping are actually worshipping. Often it's themselves. It's their pride

or vanity, their human strength or willpower, their money or something that makes them think they're in control. To sophisticated people, worship looks barbaric, and too costly. But worship isn't anything to be afraid of. It doesn't cause us to lose our identity or make us any less of a person. In fact, it's when we learn *who* to worship and *how* to worship that we become *most fully human*. Because we're made in his image, when we worship God, we find our life's purpose, to honor and glorify him and become more like him. Worshiping Jesus is the most fulfilling thing in life. The Bible says that if we worship deaf and dumb and lifeless idols, we become just like them (Psalm 115:4–8). If we worship money, we become like money, cold and calculating. If we worship sex, we become like animals. If we worship ourselves, we become ruthless and paranoid monsters like Herod.

But what's at the heart of Christian worship? Some think, "Well, I go to church every Sunday and make a generous offering. Isn't that enough?" Nope, that alone is not worship; it's just duty. Paul urges us: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom.12:1). First off, real spiritual worship happens "by the mercies of God." What are these "mercies"? Simply, it's God's saving grace in Jesus, which we could never deserve. Many people feel entitled. Some think they're in good with God because of their family, or their zeal or hard work. But real worship starts with the sheer mercies of God. When we experience his mercies, we don't think we know better, that we're superior, or that we're doing God or anybody else a favor. Instead, we see that from him and through him and to him are all things, and he alone deserves glory forever (Rom.11:30–36). We don't just give him a little time on Sunday; we present to him our bodies as living sacrifices every day. We're ready to love and serve and worship him in all we do, even in menial chores, at school or work, in every aspect of life and ministry. If we don't have such devotion to God in our daily life, inspired by his mercies, on Sundays we can't just flip on a switch to do it. Every day in 2024, let's resolve to remember the mercies of God in our morning devotions and respond by presenting ourselves to him in all we do as a living sacrifice. Morning devotions are a great way to be reminded of the mercies of God. Worship without his mercies is either superficial or just self-righteous.

Also, real worship begins not with us but with God's Spirit. Jesus said that God is Spirit, and he's seeking those who worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23–24). We can do that when we worship by the Spirit of God, when we glory in Christ Jesus, and when we put no confidence in the flesh (Phil.3:3). During Spirit-filled worship services we need to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, "teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing songs and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col.3:16). During Spirit-filled services we need to worship God with reverence and awe, realizing

he's going to give us an unshakeable kingdom, and that he is a consuming fire (Heb.12:28–29). With the Spirit's help we need to repent of being so habitual, and renew real reverence and awe for the living God within us (Psalm 96:9).

Most of all, real worship focuses on our true object of worship: Jesus. To worship him, we need to know who he is. Look at verses 5–6. Jesus was from Bethlehem, the town of David. David was known as a shepherd of his people (2 Sam.5:2). But God promised that one day he would send a descendant of David to truly “shepherd my people.” He is Jesus. Only he is our real Shepherd. It's not just because of his beautiful shepherd life while on earth; it's because only Jesus solved our problem of sin, “once for all.”¹ Only Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many and poured out his blood for the forgiveness of sins.² And he's the only one whom God brought back from the dead to be our great shepherd and made an eternal covenant with us in his blood (Heb.13:20). The Bible says that Jesus our Shepherd always lives to make intercession for us (Heb.7:25). He's our Risen Lord. But he doesn't lord it over us or exercise authority over us; in fact, he's still serving us (Matt.20:25–28). He was made just like us, so he's not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters (Heb.2:11,14a). He suffered temptation, so he can help us with our temptations (Heb.2:18). He can sympathize with our weaknesses, so we can always draw near his throne of grace (Heb.4:15–16). We may have other shepherds, but Jesus is our chief Shepherd (1 Pet.5:4). As we come to know him as our Shepherd, we're happy to worship him wholeheartedly.

At the end of today's passage we learn more about worship. Look at verses 9–10. When they got confirmation from the star's reappearance, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Here, “exceedingly” can even mean “violently.” Wow! Basically, they went nuts. What preparation it was for their upcoming worship of Jesus! Maybe it's a great thing to do on Sunday mornings before we get here: shout for joy because of the grace of Jesus in my life. They were wise men, scholars, maybe a bit old and tired, but in their worship, they didn't care about their dignity. They're similar to King David, who in his wholehearted worship of God, was even leaping and dancing, and when his wife despised him, he said, “It was before the LORD...and I will celebrate...I will make myself yet more contemptible than this...” (2 Sam.6:14,20–22). When we worship God wholeheartedly, celebrating his grace in our lives, we don't worry about what people think. Instead, God fills us with the greatest joy that even our worst critics can't take away. Real worship of Jesus transforms us into free and joyful people.

Look at verse 11. “And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures,

¹ Heb.7:27; 9:12,26; 10:10.

² Matt.20:28; 26:28.

they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.” To worship, they came with well prepared treasures. To worship him, we too need to be giving to Jesus, not just to a church or a charity, but to Jesus our King. Such worshipful giving is not fund-raising. It’s not pragmatic or need-based. It’s to honor Jesus my King. What do we think about our giving? Is it worthy of Jesus? Is it out of real love for him? Or is it mainly for a tax break? And notice: after giving, they just went home. No requests. They didn’t ask what he would do with the gifts. Matthew the former tax collector must have had his mind blown: “You mean they didn’t *get anything*?” When we give our treasures to Jesus our King, our souls are truly satisfied.

The wise are not just smart, or those who have the luxury to overindulge in studies. Wise people are those who find the one worthy of worship and give their all to him, purely. But it requires our whole heart. So David prayed, “Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; *unite my heart* to fear your name. I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever. For great is your steadfast love for me...” (Psalm 86:11–13a). How do we lose our hearts for worship? It’s when we allow other idols in. In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller wrote, “An idol is anything more important to you than God. Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.” John Calvin said our hearts are like “idol factories”—constantly producing a wide variety, and even new varieties, of idols. Idols can be outward, but inner idols are even more powerful—things like respect, power, status, control, greed, and comfort. These invisible idols start controlling our lives and driving us. Even good things like work, success, family, or ministry itself, can become the most sinister idols in our heart. If we look at what we spend the most time and money on, that’s our idol. For many, children become our idols. We want their success more than anything else. It seems most beautiful, but love for children can blind us to see Jesus, the one worthy of our worship. And it actually harms our children. In contrast, when we truly worship Jesus, we bless our children. And when we worship Jesus instead of ministry, we actually can do ministry well. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us see any idols lurking in our heart, and to give us the strength and courage to rip them out.

So, what does today’s passage show us about worship? First of all, real worship is Christ-centered. We can truly worship him through deep Bible study, and when we take action to seek him as our first priority. Real worship involves affection for Jesus and the desire to honor him. Worshiping Jesus is nothing but a humble response to all his mercies to us. Real worship of Jesus, in reverence and awe, can be done only by the Spirit of God. We worship Jesus as we come to know him as our Shepherd King. Real worship of Jesus fills us with the greatest joy. Real worship includes giving him our treasures, without expecting anything in return. Most of all, real worship of Jesus requires our whole heart.

May God help us see and repent of the idols we're treasuring, and fill us throughout this new year with the true spirit of worshiping Jesus.