




# The Problem of Shallow Worship

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** True worship magnifies God’s great worth and brings blessing to the worshiper.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that overnight success is rare. It is more frequently spelled with the letters W-O-R-K. His book examines the lives of successful people and groups: J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Beatles, Bill Gates, and so on. He shows how these people were not instantly successful; they became so by dedicating at least 10,000 hours to their particular crafts—programming, practicing, and putting in hours when nobody was looking.

 Consider someone whose success you admire, an athlete, musician, or writer whose abilities you appreciate. How would you describe that person?

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If you focused on a professional athlete, you might have responded with words like “excellent,” “devoted,” “committed,” and “passionate.” The same adjectives would apply to a prominent entrepreneur, a successful businessman, or a talented actor.

Now let’s change the question. This time, instead of describing an athlete or businessman, what if we asked for adjectives describing your devotion to and worship of the Lord. Would you give the same adjectives in order to describe your worship?



## Voices from Church History

“It is possible to worship God with our lips and not worship God with our lives. But I want to tell you that if your life doesn’t worship God, your lips don’t worship God either.”<sup>1</sup>

—A. W. Tozer (1897-1963)

Date of My Bible Study: \_\_\_\_\_

Malachi, the final book in the Old Testament, speaks extensively about God's people and how they should worship Him, or perhaps more specifically, how they *shouldn't* worship Him. While the people Malachi wrote to may have been free from pagan idolatry or heretical doctrine, their worship had grown stale and lifeless. The word delivered to Malachi was a wake-up call to a people who were halfhearted in worship, and Malachi's message resonates with us still today.

## 1. Shallow worship trivializes God's greatness (Mal. 1:6-14).

*<sup>6</sup> "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' <sup>7</sup> By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD's table may be despised. <sup>8</sup> When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. <sup>9</sup> And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts.*



What actions of the priests demonstrated their lack of respect and honor toward the Lord?

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*<sup>10</sup> Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. <sup>11</sup> For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>12</sup> But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. <sup>13</sup> But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering!*

*Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. <sup>14</sup> Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.*

Because of how flippantly the priests (and consequently, the rest of Judah) treated Him, God’s anger against them was kindled. This is not an image of an unjust, angry God. He is asking for the honor that is rightly due Him. It was the lack of respect from the people that ignited His anger against them because it minimized His worth. The greatness of God should drive us to our knees and cause us to give the absolute best of everything we have in adoration to Him.

Scripture encourages disciples of Christ to offer up five things to God:

- Our bodies (Rom. 12:1-2)
- Our finances (Phil. 4:14-18)
- Our praise (Heb. 13:15)
- Our works (Heb. 13:16)
- Our witness (Rom. 15:16)



In what ways does our worship of God through these five “sacrifices” display God’s greatness?

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## Voices from the Church

“Make your life one unflinching gaze at the glory of God. This is why you exist. This is the only addiction that can finally set you free. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Look and live.”<sup>2</sup>

—Matt Papa

## 2. Shallow worship minimizes God's worth (Mal. 3:7-12).

Once, a little brother and sister were playing “Noah’s Ark” in their bathtub with an old shoebox. After the floodwaters receded, the children decided to present an offering to God. The boy, playing the part of Noah, said to Mrs. Noah, his sister, “Let’s offer one of your toy animals as a sacrifice.” “No,” she protested, “let’s use one of yours instead!” After a time of disagreement, the girl ran into their attic. Moments later she emerged with an old toy lamb. It was dingy and dirty. Its head was smashed in, and its tail was severed from its body. “Here,” she said, “let’s use this as our sacrifice. We will never play with it again anyway.”

Sadly, this story exemplifies the motivation that often characterizes our hearts when it comes to God. We offer God what’s left, not what’s best.

*<sup>7</sup> From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’<sup>8</sup> Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. <sup>9</sup> You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. <sup>10</sup> Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. <sup>11</sup> I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>12</sup> Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.*

Upon hearing from God, the Israelites demanded a roadmap for reconciliation with Him: “How can we return?” But their question was less than sincere. They were not expressing a desire to return to Him but denying that they ever left in the first place. After all, they were still sacrificing to Him, right?



What types of things might we take pride in as evidence that we are close with God when actually we are not?

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Before we cast stones, we must remember how easy it is to wander ourselves. “Far from God?” a churchgoer might say, “I am not far from God! I go to church every week! My kids are in a Christian school. How can you say that I am far from God?” Yet many are blinded to the fact that they are blind.

God could reply to this in the same way He replied to the people of Judah: “You may not think you are far from Me, but you are.” God had challenged the Israelites previously for their poor sacrifices, their lack of worship, their idolatry, and their faithlessness. But here He gets to the root of the problem—*The heart of the problem is a problem of the heart*. Specifically, they had misallocated their funds, choosing selfishly to keep and use what they had instead of honoring God with it. You see, giving is an indication of the state of our hearts and a thermometer for how we value God’s worth.

 **Voices from the Church**

“Any attitude other than our best for [God] is lame. It’s a form of godliness without the power.”<sup>3</sup>

–Michael Catt



How do our spending habits and our hearts relate?

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How does this passage relate to Jesus’ teaching about our hearts being where our treasure is (Matt. 6:19-21)?

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God actually told His people that they were to test Him in this. This is a remarkable concept—God said, “Try Me!” If the people would test Him financially, He would provide protection from those who sought to devour them, He would meet their physical needs, and He would prosper their reputation among the nations.

We can learn three things from Malachi 3:7-12 about our actions and God’s reactions. *First*, as with much of Malachi, we learn that if we obey the mandates of God in humble and faithful service, we can expect God to act. This does not mean He rewards us immediately or even financially; however, when we trust God with our finances, we experience His blessing.

*Second*, we learn that what defines us is not what we have or think we have earned. Rather, it is what we do with the resources God has provided.

*Third*, we see in this passage that God is faithful to keep His covenant, even when the people are not. Judah failed once again, but God never does. In the life of Christ, we meet One who gave generously of Himself out of obedience to His Father and, in His death, became the generous outpouring of heavenly blessing that God bestows on all who believe.



How should Christians understand and apply God’s promise of blessing for obedience in light of what Christ has done for us?

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### 3. Shallow worship deserves judgment (Mal. 4:1-6).

*<sup>1</sup> “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. <sup>2</sup> But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. <sup>3</sup> And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.*

<sup>4</sup> *“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.*

<sup>5</sup> *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”*

Judah expected unending blessings because of their position as God’s chosen people. What they received, however, was a warning. “Like an oven,” God would come to set all wrongs right—even if it began with them for their apathetic, lukewarm worship of Him. They looked forward to the day when the Lord would repay the wrongdoing of their enemies, but they did not realize that it would be a day of judgment for themselves too.

When the Lord returns again, the same conditions apply: The Lord will exact justice, and it is up to us to be prepared for it. The question we must ask ourselves is “Am I ready for this second coming?”

The final two verses of Malachi are the ultimate cliffhanger to the Old Testament. The prophet ended with a promise of someone to come to herald the coming Day of the Lord and a warning of a curse if repentance did not have its way in the community and the family. Jesus Himself made it clear that this “Elijah” was John the Baptist, who preached a message of repentance for the people of God (Matt. 17:10-12). But from this prophecy forward until his arrival, God was silent.



How would you instruct someone who sees the promise of judgment and responds by trying to get his or her life together? What is the proper biblical response?

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## Conclusion

In the New Testament, Zechariah, a priest, was struck mute for his disbelief in an angel's words that he and his wife would have a son in their old age. When that son, John the Baptist, was finally born, Zechariah's tongue was loosed to the praise of God, and filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesied that John would prepare the way for "the sunrise...from on high" (Luke 1:78-79), most likely a direct reference to Malachi 4:2. The "sun of righteousness" was the Messiah to come; the "sun" is the Son—Jesus Christ.

Aren't you glad we don't have to wait 400 years for the coming Messiah? Instead, we look back to Jesus as our Messiah who came to redeem us from our sins. He declared, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). The question for each of us today is "Has the Light of the world entered into your heart?"

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 89. *Worship*

While many reduce worship to an event or the singing of worship songs, worship is first and foremost something of the heart and extends to all areas of life. The aim and focus of worship is God, giving Him the exact due of praise and adoration that He deserves. Worship should be carried out not only at a personal level within a Christian's life but also in joining with other Christians in the corporate act of worship and stewarding our gifts for the glory of God. Corporate worship serves to edify and strengthen other Christians, but it also serves as a witness to non-believers of the greatness of God.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** After Malachi, the prophetic word of God went silent for four hundred years. But Malachi prophesied about a messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah to bring God's kingdom. Centuries later, John the Baptist arrived as the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus. The last word of the Old Testament is "curse," a reminder of the consequence of our sin. But in the New Testament, one of the first words we hear from Jesus is "blessing." The One who bears our curse is the One who brings us blessing.



# HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** God calls us to take worship seriously, to magnify His great worth so that all people everywhere will know His name.

1. What are some activities, both individual and corporate, that diminish our view and reflection of God's majesty and of which we need to repent?

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2. How can our worship through intentional and generous giving support God's mission and provide us with opportunities for sharing about Jesus?

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3. What effect should the coming day of judgment have on our attitudes and actions regarding our walk of faith? Regarding our gospel mission?

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