

## ***Who Worships and Who Doesn't***

Matthew 2:1-12

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I've been to the tomb of the three wise men. Really. I led a mission trip to Dusseldorf, Germany, and one afternoon we made a side trip to the city of Cologne. The main attraction there is the huge cathedral. There has been a cathedral there since the 400's, but the heart of the current building was built in the twelfth century. It became one of the most famous churches in Europe because they claimed to have the bodies of the three Magi. Nowadays, the tour guides tell the story with a wink and no one really believes that the gold sarcophagi behind the high altar actually contain the remains of the three wise men. It's pretty clear that three unidentified bodies were found in a church in Milan in 1158 and local businessmen conspired to promote them as the bodies of the wise men. A few years later Emperor Frederick of Germany conquered Milan and took the bodies home with him to Cologne, which then became a center of the medieval tourist industry.

Many thousands of people every year made pilgrimages to Cologne. We find it hard to understand how people could be so gullible, but I've thought about why people made those pilgrimages. They came to see the Magi because the Magi were the first to worship Christ. They were the first pilgrims who made a journey for the purpose of adoring Jesus, so they were a powerful symbol for medieval Christians who wanted to make a journey for the same purpose.

In Matthew, the Magi represent the Gentiles, the foreigners, coming to worship Jesus. In spite of the hymn we just sang, the gospel does not say that they are "three kings." The number three comes from the number of gifts, and the idea that they were kings comes from Old Testament prophecies Matthew doesn't even cite. What he does say is that they were Magi. To call them wise men is awfully charitable. They were probably pagan priests from Persia—in modern Iran—following a religion based on heavenly bodies, which the Old Testament completely rejected. But in the book of Acts, the term *magus* is used for a sorcerer or magician. To think of these guys as respected intellectuals from the East may miss the point. In Judea, at least, these guys were about as respectable as Johnny Carson telling fortunes as Carnac the Magnificent. Think of someone who answers the phones at the psychic friends network. To the Jews, these people were frauds, or delusional. But Matthew says that these suspect foreigners were the first to worship Jesus.

That is our appropriate response to Jesus, Matthew is saying: to *worship* him, and writing to an audience that is culturally Jewish, Matthew suggests right from the beginning that sometimes outsiders got it before the religious people—as the story of Jesus will show.

It is a common idea in the Bible that the first purpose of the people of God is to worship God. In Exodus, when God acts to set the slaves free from Egypt, he tells Pharaoh to let his people go so that they can worship him in the desert. When the law is given in that book, half of it has to do with the Tabernacle where God is to be worshipped. The Psalms are full of calls to worship: "Come, let us worship and bow down;" "Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs;...enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise." In John's gospel Jesus says that God "is seeking people who will worship him in spirit and in truth." At the end of Matthew's gospel, after Jesus is raised from the dead, his disciples finally worship him.

I grew up in church *not* thinking much about worship. Worship was the name for that hour on Sunday, not something you did personally. Worship was a noun, not a verb. As a Southern Baptist, I thought the main purpose of the church was evangelism. That whole hour was geared toward getting people saved; if you prayed, you prayed that someone would walk the aisle at the end of the service. I knew other churches where the main purpose was teaching. That hour on Sunday was like a classroom with a lecture on the Bible, and the point was to learn as much as you could. I knew other churches where the main purpose of the church was fellowship. The church was essentially a social organization and everything operated on the horizontal axis of relationships. There was rarely an emphasis on the vertical or God-talk, which was considered too private or too backward.

But in my adult life I learned from Reformed churches and Episcopalians, from the Orthodox churches and from charismatics that the first purpose of the church is to worship God. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism famously phrased it, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” That is certainly the chief end of the church as well. When we come to church we want to experience God’s presence, to pay homage to God, to humble ourselves before him and bask in his love.

I hear that for many people worship is boring. People tell me they don’t come to church because it’s boring for their kids. Suppose children said they didn’t want to go to Grandma’s house during the Christmas holidays because it’s boring. Would your first thought be to take a bunch of video games to Grandma’s house to make it less boring? I hope not. Your first response would be to feel pained that your children did not have a relationship with Grandma, so that they thought of the visit as a chore rather than a joy. I used to put a lot of effort into getting big screens and rock bands at church to keep people entertained, but I wonder if I wasn’t missing the point. Whether this hour is boring or not is not finally about the music or the preaching but about whether you want to be in God’s house because you love God and hope to hear what God has to say.

For the Magi, worship was worth a journey. It was worth hardship. It was worth giving the best that they had. The center of worship for them was the offering. The hymn we sang pointed to the possible meaning of the three gifts: gold was a gift fit for a king; incense was used in worship, as it still is; but then there was myrrh. Gold and frankincense are mentioned in the prophecy in Isaiah 60, but not myrrh. Myrrh was a valuable aromatic like frankincense in the first century, but its normal use was for embalming. Why give that to a baby? In Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, there is a scene in which the Magi offer their gifts to the baby Brian, mistaking him for the Messiah. Brian’s mother thanks them for the gold and frankincense, but she tries to give back the myrrh. Why would Matthew include myrrh?

Perhaps he knew the tradition that Mark cites of Jesus being offered a mixture of wine and myrrh to drink when he hung on the cross (Mark 15:2). Perhaps he knew the tradition John records that Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus. Matthew wants to give us a whiff of death right here at the beginning of the story. He wants his readers to know what they are in for. Worship of Jesus involves worship of the crucified Messiah. The cross is foreshadowed by this gift of myrrh as it is by the slaughter of baby boys in Bethlehem by Herod. The contrast between Herod, the official “King of the Jews” appointed by Rome, and these foreign occultists whom some call “kings” could hardly be more pronounced.

The great irony in this story is who worships and who doesn’t. The ones who should know God most clearly, the ones with the inspired scriptures, who can quote the prophets, the

ones who have a history of being God's exceptional nation—they do *not* worship. Herod has no plan to worship the Messiah; he's lying. He and all who support him are *using* religion to hold onto their power. They use the language of religion to clothe their political claims, and they see their status as the chosen ones as a means to an end.

No, in this story, the ones who worship are the Persians, the ones we today call Iranians. They are the ones who follow what seems clear to us is a false religion. According to our doctrine they are outsiders to the covenant. They are foreigners who pose a threat to our security. But in Matthew's story, it is the foreigners, the Iranians, who *really* desire to worship. And so, ironically, it is these foreigners who find Jesus and worship him and bring him offerings.

Those who claim to be true worshipers come to Bethlehem only to kill Jesus, because Jesus is a threat to their power. Eventually, 30 years later, they succeed in killing him. And so the irony of the Magi is related to the irony of the cross: the great enemies of God are those who claim a special relationship with him. Those whom God befriends when he walked among us are the outsiders and the downtrodden. Our model for worship, Matthew audaciously asserts, are the seekers who come from far away without the advantage of scripture or tradition but come sincerely desiring to worship God as King.