Chapter 15
Worship Overflows in Justice

Justice and mercy are intrinsic to God and
therefore intrinsic to the worship of God.
—Mark Labberton

My first few years of knowing God were amazing. As I sang and prayed "reveal yourself to me," I started to see the heart of God. My view of self, God and the world changed. I started asking different questions about my future. Instead of "how can I make a lot of money and be happy in life?" I started asking, "What do you want me to do, God?"

I was experiencing the overwhelming privilege of being loved by the King. It didn't take long before I started to catch his generous heart. What is he like? He's full of compassion for other people:

> *Who is like the Lord our God*, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth? *He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap*; he seats them with princes, with the princes of their people. *He settles the barren woman* in her home as a happy mother of children … (Ps 113:5-9, emphasis added).

I was beginning to catch the connection between worship and mission. I sang and prayed, "Give me your heart." He began to do it.

What I was experiencing was nothing new, but it was revolutionary. In the worship life there's a never-ending cycle of absorbing more of the love of God and a corresponding urge to spread that love around.

John Piper, in his book *Let the Nations Be Glad*, speaks of worship as both the *fuel* and the *goal* of missions. "When the flame of worship burns with the heat of God's true worth, the light of missions will shine to the most remote people on earth." Piper goes on to say, "the goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God ... Worship is the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory."[1]

When we consider the worthiness of God it turns us into worshipers and, in turn, mercy givers. When we see the glory, power and love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the natural and necessary response is extraordinary worship and generous mercy. When we discover God, He calls us to follow in his footsteps. When we become wed to Christ, we are wed to his cause.

Mark Labberton has written a book called *The Dangerous Act of Worship*. It's all about the life-changing implications of worship for every Christian. Mark opens our eyes to a rich biblical look at what worship really is:

> Worship names what matters most: the way human beings are created to reflect God's glory by embodying God's character in lives that seek righteousness and do justice. Such comprehensive worship redefines all we call ordinary. Worship turns out to be the dangerous act of waking up to God and to the purposes of God in the world, and then living lives that actually show it.[2]

Throughout scripture we see a progression of revelation, worship, transformation and action. You want examples? Try these on for size:

God reveals himself to Abram and it propels him on a harrowing journey of faith into a foreign land. Abram's sojourn arises out of worship and revelation, but has a purpose far greater than his own life and family. All along the way God promises to bless Abram and to make him a "blessing to all nations." Blessing others was integral to the experience of knowing God.

Isaiah was entranced by a vision he saw, in Isaiah chapter six, of the Lord in the temple, complete with worshiping angels, an outpouring of smoke and the shaking of the building. He was cut to the heart by an overpowering vision of God's holiness. When he cries, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man," (Isa 6:5) an angel comes to touch his lips with a coal from God's altar, symbolizing cleansing. Immediately, Isaiah is recruited by God to go and spread God's message. True worship turns us inside out. We get cleaned up on the inside, and we give out the mercy we've received.

Jeremiah delivered a prophecy to Shallum, who inherited the kingship of Judah from his father King Josiah. While Josiah was generous to the poor, Shallum oppressed the poor and worshipped other gods. Jeremiah confronts Shallum, who had built a beautiful home to live in:

> But a beautiful cedar palace does not make a great king! Your father, Josiah, also had plenty to eat and drink. But he was just and right in all his dealings. That is why God blessed him. He gave justice and help to the poor and needy, and everything went well for him. *Isn't that what it means to know me*? (Jer 22:15-16, emphasis added).

It's not enough to have an interior, mystical knowledge of God. We often sing, "I want to know you." If we really *know* him, one thing we'll do is help the poor. Over and over again we see this theme being trumpeted by the prophets. It's not enough to have a great church service.

I've had some extraordinary experiences of hanging out with Jesus by hanging out with the poor. In a sense, you can't really *know* Jesus unless you *do* what He did. Here's a quote from the "prophet" Bono that sheds light on this reality:

> God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.[3]

Doing Church Isn't Enough

God is not impressed with people who really know how to "do church" but forget about securing justice for the poor. As a worship songwriter, verses like these from the prophet Amos really get my attention: "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:23-24).

The songs I've written constantly point me towards action. What am I *doing* to respond to the Lord's commandments? What is the practical outworking of my worship? Mark Labberton says, "we reflect the worthiness of God by how we love and serve whomever and whatever God considers to be of worth."[4] It's easy to sing, "Worthy are you, Lord." It's more challenging to actually *show* mercy to the hurting and destitute.

The New Testament tells the same story. When the crowds came to John the Baptist to be baptized he could tell they weren't sincere in their repentance. They were going through a religious exercise by coming out into the desert to see this wild prophet. He doesn't pull any punches when he asks them to "Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing … " (Luke 3:8). John is saying, "it's not about your family of origin, it's about what you *do."*

The crowd asked, "What should we do?" John replied, "If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry" (Luke 3:11 NLT). John is saying that feeding the hungry is one of the *most basic and fundamental* fruits of repentance. It's Christianity 101. It's very straightforward. As Bono says, "'Love thy neighbor' isn't a piece of advice, it's a command."[5]

Kay Warren, wife of author and pastor Rick Warren makes the same point:

> The bottom-line "proof" of our love for Jesus is a surprising measurement. It's not found in the ways we have typically used to evaluate spiritual maturity. Proof of our love for Jesus is found not merely in attending church, reading the Bible, singing praise songs, or serving as an usher or an elder (although each of these activities is an important part of a growing spiritual life), but in loving and serving the sick, the poor, the weak, and the marginalized."[6]

Knowing the Bible isn't enough

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus … " (Luke 10:25). This is the beginning of the story of the Good Samaritan. Someone who knew the Bible really well came to Jesus to ask about how to get to heaven. He knew the right answer; love God and love your neighbor. But his motives weren't right; he wanted to *justify himself*, so he asked Jesus, " … And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29, emphasis added).

This "expert in the law" wanted to protect himself from a broad definition of "neighbor." He felt fine about helping the people who lived on his side of town, but the idea of helping a lowly Samaritan would have been repulsive to him. Jesus tells the story in which the Samaritan is the hero because he *does* something to help someone in dire need. Jesus is essentially saying to him "It's not just about knowing the Bible, it's about what you *do*." He says to the Bible expert: " … *Do this* and you will live" (Luke 10:28 NLT, emphasis added).

From this story, we learn to open our hearts wide to our neighbors, whether they live across the street or across an ocean.

John Wimber's New York Taxi Ride

Here is a story I heard John tell many times in conferences.

> Years ago in New York City, I got into a taxi cab with an Iranian taxi driver who could hardly speak English. I tried to explain to him where I wanted to go, and as he was pulling his car out of the parking place, he almost got hit by a van that had a sign reading *The Pentecostal Church*. He got real upset and said, "That guy's drunk." I said, "No, he's a Pentecostal. Drunk in the spirit, maybe, but not with wine." He asked, "Do you know about church?" I said, "Well, I know a little bit about it; what do you know?" It was a long trip from one end of Manhattan to the other, and all the way down he told me one horror story after another that he'd heard about the church. He knew about the pastor that ran off with the choirmaster's wife, the couple that had burned the church down and collected the insurance—every horrible thing you could imagine. We finally get to where we were going, I paid him, and as we're standing there on the landing I gave him an extra-large tip. He got a suspicious look in his eyes; he'd been around, you know. I said, "Answer me this one question." Now keep in mind, I'm planning on witnessing to him. "If there was a God and he had a church, what would it be like?" He sat there for a while making up his mind whether to "play" or not. Finally he sighed and said, "Well, if there was a God and he had a church, they would care for the poor, heal the sick, and they wouldn't charge you money to teach you the Book." I turned around and it was like an explosion in my chest. "Oh, God." I just cried; I couldn't help it. I thought, "Oh Lord, *they know*. The world knows what it's supposed to be like. *The only ones that don't know are the Church*.

> When you joined the kingdom, you expected to be used of God. I've talked to thousands of people, and almost everybody has said, "When I signed up, I knew that caring for the poor was part of it; I just kind of got weaned off of it, because no one else was doing it." Folks, I'm not saying, "Do something heroic." I'm not saying, "Take on some high standard, sell everything you have and go." Now, if Jesus tells you that, that's different. But I'm not saying that. I'm just saying, participate. Give some portion of what you have—time, energy, and money, on a regular basis—to this purpose, to redeeming people, to caring for people. Share your heart and life with somebody that's not easy to sit in the same car with. Are you hearing me? *That's where you'll really see the kingdom of God.*

Joyce Rees

Another person who has *really* seen the kingdom of God among the poor is a friend of mine named Joyce Rees. Joyce was raised in the church and knew the Lord as a child. But as a teenager she wandered from the faith and was turned off by hypocrisy in the church. Then she was the victim of a terrible accident in a pick-up truck. Joyce says:

> I had three broken vertebrae, a broken pelvis, and a broken knee. I suffered a massive brain trauma. The brain injury was the worst of all—the doctors said I had 2 to 10 years to recover. They told my parents that my best hope would be to be a clerk in a gas station.[7]

Three months later, she was miraculously healed when she received prayer. While laying on the floor after the prayer, she had an encounter with God:

> It felt like I had a blanket laying over my whole body. I thought they had put a blanket over me for modesty. When I realized it wasn't actually a blanket, I got really scared in what I would describe as a "reverent fear." I said in my head "what is this?" and I heard a voice saying "this is me; this is my peace." I didn't have to ask who "me" was. I started repenting. That's when I told him "if you let me off the floor I won't be just like a church Christian. I'll really follow you."

Joyce describes her response to this incredible gift of restored health:

> If someone walked up to you and gave you the most valuable gem in the whole world, you wouldn't just walk off and say "thanks." You'd want to respond with radical generosity in return. The healing I received was excessive, lavish kindness and I knew I had to respond appropriately. To say "Oh, thanks for the miracle," wasn't going to cut it. So my life of worship began right there.

Joyce went on to become a pastor in the youth department of a mega church in Langley, B.C. and later a sought-after speaker in many denominations across Canada. Then she had another life-changing experience.

> Somewhere along the way, I got re-converted. Something happened to me. I started realizing God's heart for the poor—for the widow, foreigner and orphan—people who live in the margins. If I was going to disciple people to be God-worshippers, why had I never been taught that caring for the poor was central to following Jesus?

Joyce was invited to help out at a food bank in Langley that was run by Christians. She explained, "When I started serving at the food bank, I kept encountering Jesus in crazy ways." One experience she had at the food bank was helping a Somalian refugee lady get food for herself and her little twin boys.

> It was the beginning of my realizing that this is where God resides. He inhabits these kinds of places. If you want to have intimacy with God you have to get around the poor. I kind of got addicted to that because I kept getting revelation of who God was. I wasn't spiritually apathetic anymore.

After her experience with the food bank in Langley, Joyce visited a ministry in the downtown eastside of Vancouver, and later became the executive director, a position she held for eight years. This is one of the most concentrated areas of homelessness, drug use and prostitution in North America and the world. About twenty thousand poor people live in five square miles. There is a higher rate of AIDS and HIV infection here than in Botswana. The World Health Organization labels it as having a pandemic with the AIDS virus.

When she knew the Lord was leading her to quit her pastoring job she felt kind of ripped off. She had "served many meals" of teaching people to seek the Lord and now that there was some deep renewal happening in the church, she felt she was "missing out on the dessert." Things were "getting good" at the church; people were becoming more spiritually fervent.

Then she realized that being in the downtown eastside was the real "dessert." Joyce says, "Here, at Jacob's Well, is the manifest presence of God in a "turbo" kind of way. When you are where Jesus is most present, you get the most of Jesus. It kind of makes sense. If you have a choice of watching a documentary of where Jesus once visited or actually being where Jesus is *right now*, you don't watch the documentary. You go where Jesus is now. So I began to wander around encountering Jesus among the poor."

Joyce explains her day-by-day practice of asking God for direction in a sea of need:

> The downtown eastside is a particular social construct that has very grave issues. This isn't everyone's context. But in that context, I could easily be overwhelmed by all the people asking for a hand out, all the

> decaying bodies, and the deep brokenness—lots of people with mental health issues. I had to ask God everyday, "give me eyes to see, ears to hear and a heart to obey." I just wanted to see the one person you want me to help today. To give someone the banana out of my lunch, to stop and pray for someone or to have coffee with someone.

In another social context, there might be thousands of healthy-looking people. In that case you have to ask God for eyes to see the one person who is broken. We had a guy around 50 years old come to our workshop about catching God's heart for the poor. He was from West Point Grey, a wealthy neighborhood. We did an exercise in which we told the people in the workshop to look for the image of God in our neighborhood—to look for what's missing and what's present and try to sense the Lord's presence. They did the exercise and came back to the classroom, had a nice discussion and then she said to them, "I dare you to do this same exercise in your own neighborhood."

The next day was Sunday. That afternoon the man from West Point Grey explained to his wife that Joyce encouraged us to go for a walk in our neighborhood and look for the image of God. He said, "I'm going to take the dog out for a walk but I don't think I'm going to hear anything from God." On his walk, all of a sudden he saw all the Filipino nannies in his neighborhood. He had never noticed them before.

This was the beginning of a journey of trying to find relationship with one nanny. Soon they met a nanny in the park, had a chat with her and felt like the Lord said, "that's the one." Then they found out that she had Thursday nights off. So they started having her over for dinner and found out that she was only earning $800 per month. Most of that money was going back to the Philippines to support an extended family network of about twenty people. That's a type of indentured servitude; she was never going to get out of that situation. So they sponsored her to become Canadian and bring her children and her husband and her mother to Canada. It changed radically her life and the lives of her family and village.

That family heard God for *one person*. It wasn't the downtown Eastside; it was one of the richest neighborhoods in Canada. Worship is about learning what's going to please Jesus' heart. We have to know what he's up to; we have to join him in his heart activity. Looking for the one person we can help is something we should be able to practice wherever we're live. It doesn't matter what neighborhood we live in. We've got to have eyes to see."

Worshiping in Action

In a church plant I helped lead for a few years, on the last Sunday of each month, we went out into the community to serve and attempt to *be Good News*. We did this instead of having a regular church service. We put together free barbeques in low-income

neighborhoods, handed out groceries to the needy, and prayed for people's ailments and tough situations.

On one Sunday, five of us visited a lady named Kim. We had received a tip from her friend, Peter, that she had been out of work and could use some groceries. My son, Benjamin, was twelve years old. He and his friend James came along with two ladies and me. After hearing lots of stories about her beloved dogs who were playing at our feet in her little living room, we asked if there was anything in her life that we could pray for. She quickly responded that her left leg was numb below the knee; she had a bad back, and was suffering from depression. She had been unemployed and could barely find a reason to get out of bed some mornings. Her boyfriend had died a few years previously, and she was still grieving.

We prayed for several minutes and promised to keep in contact with her. She was very thankful for this visit from a group of strangers who simply came because they heard she was in need. We simply took the time to listen to her story and pray for her. She felt genuine compassion and concern. I don't know whether or not she received any physical healing.

About ten minutes after driving away from her house, my cell phone rang. It was Peter, the man who let us know about Kim's need. He said that Kim had called him in tears, overflowing with gratitude that we had come to help her. Peter said, "I almost started crying when she told me the story." Peter, the manager of a low-income trailer park, suggested that he could connect us with more people like Kim who needed help.

Our worship gatherings are deeper and have more integrity if they are followed up with visits to people like Kim. We are the church gathered, and the church scattered. We need to let people like Kim see that we actually care about them and want to help in a practical way. Isn't that what Jesus did?

Seeing the Big Picture

In Israel's history there was a time when extravagant rituals of worship were detestable to God. Micah, Isaiah and Joel are some of the prophets who woke God's people up to the kind of worship God really wanted:

> With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Mic 6:6-8).

Are we too preoccupied with creating the best "worship show" while the world is full of suffering? There's not a simplistic answer to that question. Excellence in the arts doesn't necessarily preclude rivers of righteousness and justice flowing out from the church. But the church can make the mistake of catering to an entertainment-hungry society, labeling it as the worship that God desires, while forgetting about the foreigners, widows and orphans that are within a mile of the church's front doors.

Conclusion

When we see Jesus, we see the *great giver*. We see that it's truly more blessed to give than receive. We're so grateful when we ponder the mercy of God lavished on us. Our natural response is, "How can I show my gratitude?" In view of God's mercy we give our bodies—not just our meditations, but our energy and time—to making a difference in our world. Through simple acts of kindness and joyful sacrifice, we proclaim the worthiness of Jesus by emulating his life.

1. John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 11-12.
2. Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship, Living God's Call to Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 13.
3. Paul (Bono) Hewson, "Acceptance speech at NAACP awards," Los Angeles, 2007
4. Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship, Living God's Call to Justice,* 27.
5. Hewson, "Acceptance speech at NAACP awards,"
6. Kay Warren, "Serving Jesus by Serving Others," Pirpose Driven Connection http://www.purposedriven.com/article.html?c=115102=1(accessed September 10 2010).
7. Joyce Heron, "An Interview with Andy Park," Surrey, British Columbia, Canada.