

JUDGMENT ON RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY

Amos 4:4-13; 5:18-27

**Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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A seminary professor said that he had a student who, for eight years, taught in a school in Nashville, Tennessee, for children with hearing disorders. These children didn't have a physical problem hearing; they just couldn't really make contact with what was being said. They couldn't understand. After eight years of trying to help these children, the student said, "I just could not stand it anymore. I went home crying; I went to work crying." He said that one year, right after the Thanksgiving holiday, he went to visit a beautiful little girl in the school. Her name was Heather. She was seven years old. They went out to the playground, and the teacher went over to Heather, took her by the shoulders, positioned himself right in front of her, face-to-face, and said, "Heather, what did you eat for Thanksgiving?"

Heather replied, "My shoes are red."

"I just couldn't do it anymore," the student told his professor.

The professor said he didn't have the heart to tell the seminarian that he was going to have experiences pretty close to that in church. The professor said he remembered being in Dallas at a church in which the music, the anthem, the prayers, the songs – everything gelled. And in the sermon, everything was just right. The professor said he felt himself in the presence of God. He said, "Standing there after the benediction, I just didn't want to move." He said there was something about the presence of God in that worship service that literally immobilized him. And he was just a guest. A man in the pew in front of the professor, whom the professor did not know, turned around and said immediately after the worship service, "Do you think Tom Landry's going to coach the Cowboys another year?"

"Do you know what that man said to me?" the professor asked. "That man said, 'My shoes are red.'" (Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories, p. 27)

The ancient Israelites were focusing on red shoes, too. They were focusing on entirely the wrong thing when it came to worship. They focused on ritual and not righteousness. They focused on giving only their offerings without giving their heart. They focused on busyness rather than being good to the poor and the needy in their community.

Eugene Peterson said, "As a pastor, I don't like being viewed as nice but insignificant. I bristle when a high-energy executive leaves the place of worship with the comment, 'This was wonderful, Pastor, but now we have to get back to the real world, don't we?' I had thought we were in the most-real world, the world revealed as God's, a world believed to be invaded by God's grace and turning on the pivot of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

The executive's comment brings me up short: he isn't taking this seriously. Worshiping God is marginal to making money. Prayer is marginal to the bottom line. Christian salvation is a brand preference." (Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, p. 27)

How important is worship?

In Amos 4:4-5, God is actually sarcastic. His sarcasm is enveloped within a priestly call to worship. The priestly call directed the worshiper to come to the shrine and seek God and to find life. (Billy K. Smith, *Amos-Obadiah-Jonah, the New American Commentary, Broadman and Holman Publishers 1995, p. 87*) Jeroboam I had erected calves at Bethel and Dan so that the people would not travel to the Southern Kingdom, to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12:26-30a). By the time of Jeroboam II (son of Joash), these places were popular shrines.

Amos, speaking on behalf of God, invites the ancient Israelites to go to Bethel and sin and to go to Gilgal and sin some more. "Bring all the sacrifices, the tithes and offerings with you when you come." The law proscribed offerings (Leviticus 6:8-13) and a special tithe every three years for the benefit of the Levites (Deuteronomy 14:20-29). A thank offering included the bringing of leaven and unleavened bread (Leviticus 7:11-13). This offering was an expression of gratitude for the deliverance of God. The free-will offering, also voluntary, was an expression of gratitude for God's goodness in a more general way. Both the free-will offering and thanks offering were peace offerings, unusual in the fact that the worshiper was to share in the sacred meal. (Billy K. Smith, *Amos-Obadiah-Jonah*, p. 88)

Notice, Amos sarcastically says don't bring your tithes every three years, but every three days! These worshipers like to brag about their big gifts, they like to "make them known" (verse 5).

Of course, we know by now from our study in Amos that they were making their money off the backs of the poor, living self-indulgent lifestyles and selling the souls of the needy for the price of a pair of sandals (Amos 2:6; 4:1-3). Their gifts may have been large, but they were not sacrificial.

Sometimes God rejects our worship (Amos 5:21-24).

Amos began to list out the elements of the worship of the ancient Israelites. God rejected their worship. Among the functions of a cultic priest in the Israelite religion was to announce to the worshipers God's acceptance of and delight in the sacrifices they were bringing (Leviticus 1:3-4; 22:8-19). When the prophet rejected their worship, the Israelites were offended and surprised.

Amos pulled no punches. He declared, "I hate," "I reject." In speaking of hating the feast, Amos was speaking about God's rejection of their celebration of the annual pilgrimage festivals: Unleavened Bread (Passover), Weeks (Harvest), Tabernacles (Ingathering). These feasts represented the occasions when the people of God ordered their lives around the sacred calendar.

God, furthermore, does not "delight in your solemn assemblies" (Amos 5:21). When God appreciates our sacrifices, He breathes them in and accepts them as a pleasing aroma to His nostrils. Because of the rising odor of their sinful lives, their injustice against the poor, God holds His nose

when ancient Israel offers a sacrifice. He rejects the odor of their festival worship. The literal translation of Amos 5:21 is “nor do I like to smell your solemn assemblies.”

Look at Amos 5:22

Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.

The three sacrifices mentioned here are the first three of the five main Levitical offerings presented in Leviticus 1-7. These are the offerings that relate to consecration and worship, as opposed to the other two offerings which are used solely for atonement or for the paying of sins.

The burnt offering was the sacrifice in which the entire animal was consumed on the altar and arose to God in smoke. Grain offerings was a term used for various sacrifices brought as a gift to God. Fellowship offerings were those in which part of the animal was consumed on the altar and part was eaten by the worshiper – somehow symbolizing communion between God and the worshiper as they both enjoyed the sacrifice.

“I’ll have no regard for these,” God says. “I’ll not accept them” is the language of shutting one’s eyes. “I won’t look on your sacrifices, much less breathe them in as a sweet aroma,” he seems to be saying as we combine verses 21 and 22.

Let’s look at the next passage. It deals with the music.

Amos 5:23

Take away from Me the noise of your songs;
I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.

Look at the body posture of God. God is in heaven above as ancient Israel worships. He rejects their worship because He has shut nostrils, closed eyes, and now he has stopped up his ears so he won’t even hear the clanging noise they are making in His house of worship. It’s similar to the attitude of God found in Malachi 1:10. “‘Oh that there were one among you who would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar. I am not pleased with you,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and I will accept no offering from your hand.’”

God was so displeased with His worshipers because the music offered up really sounded like noise to Him.

I want us to try to understand why God has rejected ancient Israel’s worship, and I want us to understand why God might reject our worship, too.

I. God rejects our worship when we focus on ritual rather than righteousness.

The great oddity of our time is that more churches are splitting up over what we call the “worship wars” – wars about whether we will take out the hymn book or whether we will sing choruses projected on a screen, whether we’ll be “contemporary” in nature or “traditional.” And worshipers

have focused an inordinate amount of energy on what kind of music ought to be played during a worship service.

I think if we look at the mind of God in this passage, we realize that we are asking the wrong question completely. It doesn't seem to me that the style of music matters to God as long as the theology of the music is good. In this passage it is not the style of the music that causes Him to reject the songs of ancient Israel. He does not say, "I reject your songs because they're not to the right beat or the right rhythm or the right meter." No, what He says is, "I reject your singing, I even reject your instrumental pieces, because of your heart."

God hears the music completely differently than we do. We might have an accomplished soloist sing before you, who has not come with a pure heart and clean hands. By the time his music gets to heaven, it may sound raspy and rattling to God's ears because it lacks righteousness.

On the other hand, in the moment of worship there might be a soloist who misses a word and who struggles with a note here and there. We may not enjoy it at all here in the sanctuary. But the heart may be pure and the righteousness might be present and, by the time the sound reaches the throne of God, it may be music that is particularly pleasing to the Almighty.

God hears with a different set of ears. When churches argue over what type of music to sing, there is a real sense in which we have missed the point of worship. The question is not to what tune do we sing but, rather, are our hearts in tune with God when we sing.

II. God rejects our worship when we have treated others unfairly all week long.

Their problem was they were giving God rivers of religiosity when He wanted rivers of righteousness and justice. Notice what He calls for. Notice His declaration.

Amos 5:24

And let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The folk in ancient Israel had been cheating each other all week long, abusing the poor and the needy, charging for services and goods they had not delivered. The ethics of justice and righteousness are not optional characteristics that would be nice to see in a few worshipers. The prophet Amos makes it clear, without reservation or qualification that there are some worshipers whom God will reject.

Nothing is more embarrassing to the church than when one of its members conducts himself in such a way that his ethics in the business community are questionable. Then folk discover he's a member of First Baptist Church. You embarrass not only yourself; you embarrass your church family; and you embarrass the God you represent. Your life in the community, in the classroom, on the field of coaching, in the hospital, on the sales floor must be congruent with what you teach and preach by your presence at worship this morning.

Yes, God rejected their worship because of their conduct in the community all week long.

III. God rejects our worship when we focus upon ourselves rather than upon Him.

Ancient Israel was not focused upon God, upon really worshipping Him in spirit and in truth. They were focused upon themselves. The church must move beyond our experience of God to the God of our experience, and, finally, to God's experience of us.

Walter Wink said it best. "For you to come here this morning in worship is to remember Who owns the house." (Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother*, p. 26).

God knows when we come to worship thinking about ourselves, thinking about other things – when we're not focused on Him. God said, "Stop focusing on yourselves, what you're doing with your offerings, and focus on Me. I don't need your sacrifices, but, rather, the sacrifice of your heart. A heart devoted toward me."

(See Psalm 51 where David recognizes God wants not ritual but righteousness)

C. S. Lewis suggested an analogy that makes the point well. Suppose I were to read Shakespeare's famous love sonnet, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," to my dog Jake. This would not be a very noble thing to do. First of all, Jake can't hear. And second, he's never shown appreciation for the famed playwright. As I would read Shakespeare's masterpiece, Jake would just be looking at me wondering if there was some scrap of food that might drop while doing so. He might shake, rattle, make noise, and then yawn and go back to sleep. But he really lacks the capacity to appreciate Shakespeare's sonnet.

But just pretend for a moment that as I read Shakespeare, he perked up his ears, brightened his eyes, and yipped with approval. I would know that he was one hound with an instinct for great literature.

But in Lewis's analogy the question is this: Would Shakespeare's sonnet be any better because Jake appreciated it? No, it is Jake who would be better off. Jake's appreciation of Shakespeare would not ennoble Shakespeare, but it would ennoble Jake. (Ben Patterson, "Worship is Forever," *Christianity Today*, January 1, 1985, p. 14)

When we come to worship God, we don't do anything for God to make Him better. But by focusing on God, we better ourselves. It is when we focus on God that we really, truly change ourselves.

The Bible is full of the act of worship – from the songs of the Psalter to the movement of the church in the Acts of the Apostles to the Apocalypse of John, we find worship. Worship lasts forever. As you read through the pages of Revelation, you realize the proclamation "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come" is but a small portion of the many scenes of adoration toward God. Worship is something that we do that will last forever. When everything else stops, we will still be worshipping God, focusing on God. When you worship, think about God. We'll join the elders and the 10,000 angels – we will join them all in declaring and singing to the holiness of God.

To really worship, you have to stop thinking about yourself. As you focus your heart and mind on God, you'll experience a range of feelings from humility to wonder to awe to mystery to joy to peace to contentment to fellowship with others in adoring God.

But as Mark Horst has said, "Good worship is self-effacing; instead of calling attention to itself, it serves as a channel, a vehicle, through which we see ourselves and God more clearly." (Christian Century, November 11, 1987, 991)

When our worship becomes self-conscious, we lose the God-consciousness of worship.

If you come today worrying about a myriad of things – things that are going to happen this afternoon or next week – if you come with a score card judging the music and the preacher, if you come with a spirit that does anything rather than fall down and worship God, you're going to miss it.

IV. God does not accept our worship when we refuse to realize that one day we'll be judged not only for our worship, but for our lives as well.

You probably didn't notice it, but this passage is preceded by a teaching about the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord was that future, horrific day in ancient Israel where God would come and judge the enemies of Israel. So the Northern Kingdom was longing for the Day of the Lord, the day when they would be put in the position and seat of power. Or so they thought.

But look at Amos 5:18-20.

Alas, you who are longing for the day of the Lord,
For what purpose will the day of the Lord be to you?
It will be darkness and not light;
As when a man flees from a lion,
And a bear meets him,
Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall,
And a snake bites him.
Will not the day of the Lord be darkness instead of light,
Even gloom with no brightness in it?

And then He begins to tell them about His rejection of their worship. We must, each one of us, worship God with the realization that ultimately only His evaluation of us matters. Period. That's it. Our self-evaluation, in the end, amounts to nothing. The evaluation of our friends and family ultimately, as important as they seem by themselves and by themselves alone, actually has no merit whatsoever. The only evaluation that matters in the final analysis is God's evaluation of me and God's evaluation of you. And that is a terribly frightening thought.

As we come to worship this morning, we need to realize we're worshipping the one who ultimately determines our eternal destiny.

How do we come this morning? With clean hands and a pure heart? With a broken spirit and a broken heart over our sin? With sincerity and genuineness?

God doesn't look at our suit of clothes. God looks at our heart. How have we treated others all week long?

I don't really understand how anyone who, in good health, could be here during worship could leave after Sunday School or skip worship and simply come to Sunday School. Worship is not Bible study. Bible study is important, but worship is a horse of a different color. Even Bible study doesn't last forever. Only worship is eternal.

One pastor remembers a young woman, twenty-eight years old, at St. Mark's Church in Atlanta. She said to the pastor, "This is the first time I was ever in a church."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Well," the pastor said, "How was it?"

She said, "Kind of scary."

He said, "Kind of scary?"

She said, "Yeah."

"Why?" the pastor asked.

And she said, "It just seems so important." She said, "You know, I never go to anything important. This just seemed so important." (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 132)

She was right. This is just that important – so important it's scary.