

Worship which Forms Us in the Acceptable Image of Jesus Christ
Based on Malachi 1:6-9 and Amos 5:21-24
David Jahnke, 1/12/19

We are studying in our small groups a new Francis Chan book called Letters to the Church and in the first chapter, Chan reminds us that God hates some of our worship! This did not exactly seem like a helpful start to rebuilding a church. The problem is he's right biblically. But it's hard enough for people to get to worship and now we hear that God might not even like what they have to offer?

I was reminded of my sympathy for Cain who worked the land and offered a grain offering to God. But the Lord only had regard for Abel and his offering and not for Cain's. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. ⁶The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted?"

So from the very beginnings of humanity; from the time when our ancestors were moving from a primal and instinctual life to a reflective consideration of the world around them and the one who created it, we see God saying, "Your reflections about me are important...but what really matters is how you live."

This fits well with the story I told last week about people doing a ritual sacrifice in order to make things right with God and how Jesus tells us to forget about that ritual action and prioritize making things right with anyone who might have something against us. So first we have a charge from God to live well. And when we do not live well and think we have to do something religious for God to make up for it, God says worry about making it up with the person out there!

And the same goes for the prophet Amos' words to his people who moves us beyond personal piety to social justice. Listen to God speaking through the prophet Amos.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

So here the prophet moves us beyond our own individual piety into the kind of society we make around us. Any religion that comes to justify or excuse apathy regarding an unjust society around us is appalling to God. And that is why I am constantly challenging you to care for the less fortunate and give your time to make things right in our society.

All of this brings us to the point of true worship which is form God in us. I was watching a debate between a Jewish Rabbi David Wolpe and the atheist Christopher Hitchens. And the rabbi insisted that the heart of his faith tradition was developing goodness in human beings because this was what God demands of us. He pointed out that this was a goal of almost all faith traditions and that all faith traditions have failed at this over and over again...and that is because we human beings are deeply flawed creatures who are profoundly prone to greed, promiscuity and violence.

He mentioned a study about bullying which discovered that bullying is the worst in preschoolers. And that is because meanness and selfishness have such deep roots in our DNA. He joked about never having to scold and worry about children for sharing too much. Because that never happens. And because if it did, that would be a wonderful thing.

But from a purely materialistic and naturalistic perspective, sharing too much would indeed be problematic. In fact why share at all? Why not hoard everything and keep it from our competitors and increase our ability to secure resources, attract mates and get our offspring to reproductive ages?

This kind of hoarding may be natural. But it is hard to argue that it is right or good. It is, in fact, very hard to argue that anything is good or better than anything else, unless you acknowledge that there really is an invisible metaphysical moral order to the universe.

The metaphysical reality of goodness is a really important commonality among the great faith traditions. We agree with the rabbi about both human depravity and that God wants us to be as good and just and loving and righteous and truthful as we can possibly be. Jesus told the sinners he was hanging out with that they must “exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” and dared to say that they should be “Perfect just as our Father in Heaven is perfect” and then showed them what he meant by that.

And living like that is really really hard which is exactly why we need to be formed in Jesus' Way week in and week out. Worship does not just teach us about Jesus. It forms the Spirit of Jesus within us from the youngest of our days and challenges us week in and week out to strive to be more and more like him. And we never get there. But we keep trying. And we can keep returning to God again and again because of his unconditional love and mercy.

Mr. Rogers says it well. I saw this at the YMCA last night. "Knowing that we can be loved exactly as we are gives us all the best opportunity for growing into the healthiest of persons."

You are loved no matter what. But you need to become more loving. So keep getting here to practice and thus grow in love. And bug your grown children and grandchildren as well. "Did you find a church yet? YOU do know that Jesus needed weekly synagogue worship so maybe it would be a help to you and yours too."

And I want to assure you of this. Your worship this day has been incredibly pleasing to God. You have sung praises. You have acknowledged your frailties. You have desired transformation. And you have heard a challenging word. And now you are being sent out to do well.

And that is the critical final step. Will you put this into practice out there? Will you rejoice in a new day and give thanks to God? Will you say you are sorry when you lose your temper or otherwise mess up? Will you consider God's Word and work for His justice? Human life is so hard...but God is so very pleased as we persevere and keep trying our best to follow Jesus. And you are doing that thanks to the Spirit of Jesus who does far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine...

Sermon Questions for Reflection and Application

1. Why did God "hate [Israelite] worship" and when will God hate ours accordingly?
2. Even though Cain's offering was insufficient, what did God tell him would make him acceptable?
3. What did Jesus say about what to do regarding to whom we offer a gesture when we live less than acceptably?

4. Amos tells us our justice is about more than personal piety. Biblical justice demands what regarding our society? *This is a huge question but think about and or research a few things that God expects from society/ community.*

5. So even though our worship is imperfect, why does it remain essential in order to receive and do what God desires for us and from us?

6. Will you (re)commit to worship on Sundays and in your daily practices? What worship-led disciplines are easiest for you and which ones hard? Might participation in weekday church programs help?

7. Worship must send us out into the world to do what?

8. And when we fall short in all of these regards, we can get back up in the saddle because...?

Other Bible quotes from the sermon are from Gen. 4:3-7 and Matthew 5:20, 23-24, 48

