

October 23, 2005

“Worship That Is Pleasing to God” Amos 5:18-27

FCF: Irreverence > presumption

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because the LORD is God and the focus of our worship,
(magnet) our worship must then be shaped by His expressed desires.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

The question of manners is one that comes up around our house – not simply the “what” we are to do in certain situations but the “why” and “how” as well. How do you show appreciation for a meal? You say, “Thank you.” You refrain from eating until all are served. How do you show respect for someone in authority? Well, that depends. Often, one should rise upon their entering the room. In other cultures, especially if that person is royalty, it might be appropriate to kneel upon your approach as well.

But what if you don’t want to rise when they enter the room? What if you don’t feel like kneeling upon approach? Well, that would likely reflect a couple of things on your part. One, you think too much of yourself. And, two, you think too little of them.

What is the point of this? Simply that I think too often we are unwilling to “rise” and “kneel” in the presence of God. We think too much of ourselves and too little of Him. And so we’re not really all that concerned with how we approach Him.

SCRIPTURE READING: *Amos 5:18-27*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

“The day of the Lord” – what comes to mind when you hear these words? There’s much confusion on this in many circles. Much confusion, many books, obsession with apocalyptic imagery, and no few undercurrents. An anticipation of nuclear holocaust and a global fire. A despising attitude that says, *“Don’t worry. We’ll be okay. It’s those other people who’ll be fried. Them, not us. We’re God’s people. He’s on our side!”* Not exactly a charitable thought. There’s little recognition of the fact that such images were meant in their original context to strengthen the resolve of God’s people, issue moral integrity, and encourage humility. That seems lost on us today.

Back to Amos. Remember his audience – not the Assyrians or the Egyptians but Israel, God’s covenant people. There was confusion as to what the “day of the LORD” meant then as well. It was a formulaic expression meaning different things depending on the context but always involving the LORD’s acting in some way. Some of the prophets spoke of it in terms of punishment of the nations for their brutality. Other prophets spoke of it in terms of salvation for Israel. Sometimes they had in mind the immediate future; at other times, something further off. Amos’ audience likely saw it as the day when the LORD would finally intervene and put Israel on top. But Amos had a different spin. It was to be a time not of blessing but of judgment. And not on the nations but on them.

Why? Amos here gives a glimpse into an early expression of the “Regulative Principle”. “What is that?” you ask. You have a Reformation era expression of it from the Westminster Confession of Faith in your bulletin. Let me try and summarize it if I may. God is God and we are not. He is holy and we are not. Therefore, great care needs to be taken in understanding how we as His creatures are to approach Him in worship. So much so that it would seem that, in the context of worship, we are forbidden to do anything that is not expressly commanded in Scripture. Or, to put it another way, for something to be acceptable to Him, it must be expressly laid out for us in His Word.

Now when you think about this and consider who our worship is ultimately for – not us but God – this makes sense. And all the more so as we hear Amos’ words. For he sets before us a frightening proposition. It is possible for us to be going along with all sorts of functions and forms – all sorts of religious exercises – and be missing it all. Or, worse, for God to despise what we are doing. Which would seem then to beg a question – given the possibility of His despising our worship, what then is He looking for?

I. MORE THAN SHOW

Certainly more than just show. Amos makes this abundantly clear.

A) Towards Man

First, more than show towards man, towards one another. Rather, something real.

1. Appearance

Appearances are not enough (**READ Amos 5:21-23**). Ostensibly, the feasts and festivals would have had a sense of corporate joy and celebration. The offerings were a shared experience. The songs a melody and harmony of instruments and voices for the building up of the whole. Implicitly if not explicitly, such activities communicated wholeness, a mutual commitment and unity to those present and those watching. Ostensibly.

2. Reality

But it doesn’t take much reading through Amos to see that all of this was on the surface. Beneath the skin there was brutality, heartlessness, selfishness, self-indulgent luxury, bribery in the courts, oppression of the poor, dispossession of the helpless. There was nothing real about all this religion. It was all a show. It was all a sham.

B) Towards God

And at its heart, this play-acting taking place between one another had its roots in the play-acting taking place in their hearts towards God Himself. Look again with me.

1. Their religion

The feasts, the solemn assemblies, the offerings – all commanded by the LORD Himself. The songs, the melodies, marked by a variety of instruments, styles, and great technique.

2. His rejection

These were not “irreligious” people. But how does the LORD respond to their religion? He rejects it. Look at the terminology used here – despising, not delighting, not accepting, take away, noise. Worse than intolerable. It was offensive, repulsive – no better than the idolatry of their forefathers (**READ Amos 5:25-27**). Literally, in verse 21, The LORD speaks of their worship as being a stench in His nostrils. Now think of the things that create a stench. What comes to mind? That’s what He says of their worship.

This was a stunning announcement to the people of Israel. Hence, the imagery in verse 19 – a man flees from a lion and then a bear only to be struck down by a snake.

Illustration:

The imagery is like the student who receives an “F” for a paper he thought was brilliant or the employee who is fired after doing what he thought was excellent work or the person whose spouse suddenly announces that he or she wants a divorce when the marriage seemed to be going so well. They were so blind. This was so unexpected.

Application:

Could this be true of us? Surely it could. The implication is so obvious but so hard. We need to consider the possibility that this could apply to us – individually and corporately. Our worship could be worse than intolerable. It could be offensive, repulsive, a stench. We have to face that. We have to begin with a simple admission and

acknowledgment of that possibility, recognizing that – whatever we may think of what we’re doing – worship is not ultimately for us and not everything is pleasing to Him. Indeed sometimes we’re just showing where our idols are. But if the LORD is God and the focus of our worship, if our worship is to be shaped by His expressed desires, then we have to begin with some sobering first steps. Oh, LORD – search us!

II. BUT TRULY REAL

For He longs for more than a show but what is truly real (**READ Amos 5:21-24**).

A) Towards Man

Two things. First, what is real towards man, towards one another. Assembling in His name must be done in a way that honors not only Him but those around us as well.

1. Justice

Justice – note what it’s not (**READ Amos 5:7**). Wormwood is a plant bitter to taste. Justice involves the treatment of others, that which they can taste. Where does it come from? (**READ Amos 5:15a**) Justice comes with the hating of evil and the loving of good.

2. Righteousness

(**READ Amos 6:12b**) Justice is the fruit, the manifestation of righteousness. Righteousness is the soil from which justice grows.

Justice is outwardly focused. Righteousness is inwardly rooted.

B) Towards God

They each are patterned on the LORD’s own actions. And they are enabled as His people trust in and turn to Him. But this trusting and turning is to be continual. This justice and righteousness are not simply for when it’s convenient. There is to be an integrity, a consistency, between what we profess to believe and how we live our lives.

Illustration:

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of the man on his way to Las Vegas with a bag over his shoulder and a Bible at his side. His friends asked as he got on the bus, “Hey, Pete. Where you going?” “Vegas,” he says. “I’m gonna gamble on the slots, drink all I can, and dance with the ladies all night long. And you know what they say – ‘What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.’” “What you taking that Bible for?” “Well,” says Pete, “If it’s as good as they say it is, I might want to stay over on Sunday and go to church.” That’s what was going on in Israel. But that’s not what Amos is calling for.

1. Rolling down like waters

He is calling for justice “rolling down like waters” – likely a play on Gilgal mentioned earlier. Gilgal was the place, upon entering the Promised Land, of Israel’s recommitting itself to the LORD, the uncircumcised men having their foreskins “rolled back.”

2. Like an ever-flowing stream

Amos is calling for righteousness moving “like an ever-flowing stream.” It is the nature of a covenant that it cannot be kept occasionally. Think marriage. It cannot stop and start like a wilderness wadi that flows with water only during the rainy seasons and otherwise is just a dry stream bed. No – this is a stream that is to flow and keep flowing.

Illustration:

Think of the Disney movie, “Aladdin”. Robin Williams played a hysterical genie trapped in and freed from a lamp. Great music. Fun movie. But listen – don’t get your theology from a cartoon. God is no genie in a bottle. We do not come here to “rub the lamp” and then get our wishes fulfilled. He is to be worshipped and served not for what we think we can get from Him but simply because of who He is and what He has done.

That's what He desires. That's what is pleasing to Him in worship.

Application:

He is not to be manipulated. He is the LORD. Even the phrase, "the day of the LORD," harkens back to His covenantal commitment to His people. He is not to be manipulated or used. He is no object. He is our God (**READ Exodus 34:6-7**).

He is not to be manipulated. Nor can He be manipulated. For He is "the God of hosts" as well. The Almighty One – all powerful, all present, all knowing. It's not just that we should not try and manipulate or use Him. He cannot be manipulated or used.

And so we have to then hear Amos saying to us, "Don't you dare come here thinking this is all about you." Who are you here for? Who then is the object of your worship? Don't you dare come here looking for a cosmic concession stand. "And don't you dare go home and live as though none of this happened." This is real.

"No, listen," Amos says. "Come, worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the LORD, our God, our Maker. For He is our God. And we are His sheep, the people of His pasture. Come. And go. And as you go, go with His peace upon you and with the humility and boldness of His presence. Live this out. Go in His name into His world."

That's what's involved in worship that is pleasing to God.

CONCLUSION:

But Israel had to face these things – the reality of their worship as a stench before their God and the need to come to Him on no terms but His own. And so do we. This is an ever present danger for us. Yes, of course, He forgives us our constant failure in these things. Who among us could say our hearts were always right and given over to Him in the ways they should be? But that forgiveness should not then give us license to slouch on unexamined but spur us on all the more. "Lord, I am yours. Show me what I was made for. Show me what is truly pleasing to you and guide me in those ways."

Earlier, I mentioned the "Regulative Principle". We need to consider some fairly obvious but hard matters here. "Worship" is a topic written and spoken much on these days. And that's good. The dialogue has been needed for a long time and may it continue. But Amos needs to be heard as well. So often the focus in this discussion remains on the easier things – the elements of the service, the order of the elements, the number of readings, the length of the prayers, the choice of the songs. We need to consider such things. They are important. But they are soft targets. And frankly, usually only given to personal preferences. We need to expand our understanding of all this. We need a more expansive "Regulative Principle." Yes, we must do only those things in worship the LORD has commanded. But what has He commanded? Something real and not for show. For the LORD insists on more than just the externals but the internals as well. What would they be? Think with me – exuberance and brokenness, unity and purity, boldness and humility, generosity and hospitality. Our readings, prayers, and music might all look just fine, be things of great theological order and brilliance. And all a stench before our God. Hear me. The externals are vital. But so too are the internals.

Who is our worship for? May we examine our hearts, wrestle with our motivations, purposes, and desires even in being here this morning. And then may He give us the grace to confess and plead for new hearts. And renewed worship. Oh, may we hear and pay heed to Amos' words. And the LORD's passion for His people.

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