

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Called to Worship, Called to Justice

Amos 5:18-27

Imagine that you arrive for worship on Sunday morning, and instead of being in the sanctuary, I'm standing under the porch, declaring the word of God. I'm not at the pulpit, where you usually see me when I'm preaching. This time, you don't even get to make it inside the building. As soon as you approach the entrance, you hear me announcing that God has had it with our worship services. He doesn't want to have anything to do with our gatherings. He says that we shouldn't even bother coming to this place.

You might begin to wonder, "What has gotten into Pastor Kevin. Why does he, and the God he speaks for, seem so upset, so angry with us? I thought he liked and was grateful for those gifts, include the T-shirt, that we gave him for Pastor Appreciation Month. True, pastor's sermons help us hear God's word of both judgment and deliverance, but this situation certainly isn't his usual approach."

Imagine that Sunday morning scenario, and you can begin to get a sense of what God's people experienced when they heard the prophet Amos announcing the Lord's rage about their spiritual condition, especially their weekly services. If Amos's intention was to gain his hearers' attention right off the bat, he certainly used some terrifying images to do so. He says that on the day of the Lord, his people won't be rejoicing at how God is crushing their enemies. Instead, they themselves will be stumbling around in the dark, trembling in fear. They'll be like prey for animals. Rather than fleeing to God for protection, they'll be fleeing from God, like someone who's running away from a lion and runs into a bear, or who makes it into his house, rests his hand on a wall, and gets bitten by a snake. Amos certainly knows how to pick a sermon illustration.

From there, the prophet turns to the subject of worship, and the news doesn't get any better. God completely rejects the worship of his people. He says no to all their congregational rituals and routines. When they come into the sanctuary to take their seats, God doesn't even want to look. In fact, he shuts his eyes. When they offer their sacrifices and the smell drifts upward, God holds his nose. And when they sing their praise choruses and hymns, God plugs his ears. The Lord doesn't want to see, smell, or hear anything that they have to offer him. The people should just as well take those worship bulletins and put them in the shredder.

So why is God so repulsed and disgusted by the people's worship? One chapter earlier, God judged their worship for being sinful and self-serving. Their assemblies had become an occasion for disobedience, an opportunity to enhance their own reputations. Rather than getting together to magnify the Lord, they were gathering to magnify themselves. The attention was on themselves rather than on God. It was all about what they were doing. Their polished music. Their record-breaking offerings. Their attendance statistics. Their well-crafted sermons. Their impressive Christmas and Easter presentations. But Amos had sharp spiritual eyes. He saw through the ways that the people were disguising love of themselves with love of the Lord.

In today's text, the topic is the same but God's reasons are different. This time, the Lord condemns his people's worship because it seems to have no impact on how they're conducting their lives when they're not in church. What was happening on the inside of the sanctuary walls wasn't matched by what was happening on the outside of the sanctuary walls. This past week's incident, with a car accidentally running into one side of our fellowship hall, is partly a reminder that this building, including its walls, is an important part of our identity. These walls help carve out space in this world where we assemble for the sacred purpose of worship. But equally sacred is the way that we honor and reflect the character of the Lord, God Almighty, in our lives beyond this special place.

"Away with the noise of your songs!," says the Lord. "I will not listen to the music of your harps" (v. 23). "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (v. 24). This is probably the most well-known verse in Amos, and in many ways a summary of the prophet's message. It's not a call for us to abandon worship. It's a call for us to live out our worship. The Lord isn't telling us to pack up our pew Bibles, hymnals, and offering plates, unplug our keyboard and sanctuary computer, sell off all the altar furniture, and padlock the church doors. He's simply telling us that worship, even sincere worship, that doesn't flow forth in lives demonstrating his commitment to justice and righteousness, is insufficient for a proper relationship with him.

Though not identical to one another, righteousness and justice are closely connected to one another in the biblical understanding of God and the biblical vision of life. Righteousness is more of a relational term describing the will of God for the relationships within a community, particularly how God's people are to relate to him, to each other, and to those outside the community itself. Justice has more of a legal sense, describing how relationships can be made right, restored, and maintained. Taken together, justice and righteousness capture the character of God, the priorities of God, and the purpose of God in human life and in the world. So it shouldn't come as a surprise to hear God tell us that he has zero tolerance for weekly worship that doesn't lead into daily lives devoted to righteousness and justice.

One of the hymns in today's service captures it well: "Break out, O Church of God, / Break thro' the wall of pride. / The love and justice of our God / Must not be locked inside."¹ Remember that as we leave this place of worship and go into all the other places where our lives take us, we're still making music. Our lives are supposed to be offering up a song of praise in the form of righteous conduct in God's world.

Chris Tomlin is a contemporary Christian music singer and songwriter. He was once asked how his understanding of worship had evolved over the years, especially in light of his global travels. He said,

As I've traveled around the world, I've found the poorer the nation, the richer the faith—every time. It's been amazing to see the expressions of worship, and the freedom of people expressing their hearts to God. There's a need, a hunger. We've also definitely seen worship and justice being married together. My friend Louie Giglio, who's on the road with me, says in a way it's like a penny: you've got worship on one side, and justice on the other side. It's still one cent, but it's representing two different things. It's not enough just to come and sing songs, then not really take care of people and help people who are in need.²

Amos wanted to help God's people see that their worship had become an end in itself. Once the benediction had been pronounced, worship was over and done. They had accomplished what they needed to do for that week. Maybe their sanctuaries in places like Bethel and Gilgal needed a sign over the entrance, like the one we have as you come into this space on

Sunday morning. It reads, ENTER TO WORSHIP, DEPART TO SERVE. That message gets further emphasized by the fact that our sanctuary doors swing both ways. We're gathered to offer praise and thanks, and then sent by God into his world to serve his kingdom, his just and righteous purposes.

Note that our service to his kingdom isn't primarily about our own vision for the world or our own intentions to do good. Most of all, it's about embodying and reflecting the character and priorities of God himself. In the experience of worship, we're formed more into the likeness of the God we worship, so that our lives beyond these walls exhibit his holiness and love.

Jacob Needleman tells about the time when he was an observer at the launch of Apollo 17 in 1975. He says,

It was launch night, and there were hundreds of cynical reporters all over the lawn, drinking beer, wisecracking, and waiting for this 35-story-high rocket.

The countdown came, and then the launch. The first thing you see is this extraordinary orange light, which is just at the limit of what you can bear to look at. Everything is illuminated with this light. Then comes this thing slowly rising up in total silence, because it takes a few seconds for the sound to come across. You hear a 'WHOOOOOSH! HHHH-MMMM!' It enters right into you.

You can practically hear jaws dropping. The sense of wonder fills everyone in the whole place, as this thing goes up and up. The first stage ignites this beautiful blue flame. It becomes like a star, but you realize there are humans on it. And then there's total silence.

People just get up quietly, helping each other up. They're kind. They open doors. They look at one another, speaking quietly and interestedly. These were suddenly moral people because the sense of wonder, the experience of wonder, had made them moral.³

In a similar way, when we gather for worship and come with a sense of wonder and awe into the presence of a righteous and loving God, God works to change us, so that we take on more of his will and more of his ways. Being his people means being like him. It means his commitment to justice and righteousness taking shape in the ways we practice justice and righteousness.

One commentator has observed that the point of today's text is "not what is wrong with worship, but what is wrong with the worshipers."⁴ That's why I wasn't standing under the porch, waiting for you as you arrived for today's service, ready to turn you away and send you back home. We still needed to come inside the sanctuary, offering our praise and thanks, and receiving God's word for our lives. Today that word calls us to examine both why we're here and what we plan to be when we leave here.

Marshall Shelley tells about the time, early in their marriage, when he gave his wife a memorable anniversary gift. It was a rain gauge. He says,

At least *I* thought it was a great gift. Susan, after all, is a farmer's daughter and keeps close watch on the weather. I envisioned her delight and nostalgia while tracking our back yard precipitation. I congratulated myself on my creativity.

Guess what? Susan was not impressed: "A rain gauge, for our anniversary?!" The rain gauge is now a family joke, a classic example of a gift enjoyed by the giver but not the receiver. One word I hear a lot these days is *authentic*, as in "we seek authentic worship." Usually this means we're trying to create an experience that helps worshipers feel something. Nothing

wrong with that, but if our focus is only on our experience, we may be giving God a rain gauge.

Are we offering in worship a gift we enjoy and figuring God will like it?

A real gift, real worship, means knowing what's important to The Receiver.⁵

"Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" That's what the Lord says is important to him. He has provided us with the gift of worship as a way of remembering just that, and as a way of sending us forth to do just that. When we begin our weekly service, a deacon stands before us to read from the Scriptures, usually a portion of a psalm. It's the call to worship. Perhaps, to make things complete, we should conclude our weekly service with another call, the call to justice. The call to make sure that our daily living prioritizes the poor, the weak, the lost, the least, the sick, the dying, the grieving, the hungry, the victimized, the overlooked, and the neglected. As we his people exercise justice and righteousness, God is praised.

¹ "Break Out, O Church of God." *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville; Convention 1991) 401.

² Allison J. Althoff and Cassie Jolene Schenck, "Chris Tomlin: On Top of the World." *Christianity Today*. December 30, 2013. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/december-web-only/chris-tomlin-on-top-of-world.html> (November 9, 2023).

³ Needleman's story is included in Bill Moyers's book, *A World of Ideas II*. See *Leadership*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Summer 1995) 39.

⁴ Donald E. Gowan, "The Book of Amos," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 394.

⁵ Marshall Shelley, *Leadership* (Spring 1999) 3.