

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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What Do You Think of Our Worship?

Isaiah 58:1-14

Worship evaluation comes in many forms. Sometimes it happens during the service itself, while things are in motion. You hear the introduction to a song and think to yourself, "Oh, that's one of my favorite hymns." Or you give the preacher a puzzled look during the sermon. Or you spot a mistake in the bulletin. Or you doodle on one of the offering envelopes during the pastoral prayer. Or you offer a hearty amen at the end of the special music. Or as a first time visitor you're relieved when we don't ask you to stand up and announce your name and where you're from. Or you do something as simple as look at your watch. These are all examples of how, during the course of the service, you're making assessments about what engages you and what doesn't, what fits and what doesn't, what makes sense to you and what doesn't, what touches you and what doesn't.

Of course there are other forms of worship evaluation that happen sometime after the service is done. You shake the pastor's hand and tell him what you thought about the sermon, or you ask for clarification about something he said. Or you get home and a family member asks, "So, how was church today?" Or you ask someone on the media team if they could turn up the volume just a little bit. Or you personally thank the person who provided the flowers on the communion table. Or you feel positive enough about what we do here on Sunday mornings that you invite someone else to come to church. Whether we're aware of it or not, we're regularly involved in assessing, analyzing, and forming opinions about our congregational worship gatherings.

In the previous church I served, we would sometimes have sermon talk back sessions immediately following the worship service. This was a time for folks to gather, particularly while the sermon was still fresh on their minds, to react and respond to both the content and delivery of the message, as well as how it fit within the overall structure of the entire service. It was helpful, especially for me, to know more about what the worshipers were hearing and thinking from their vantage point in the pews.

Some churches even undertake a more structured, intensive process for evaluating their congregational worship. With the widespread use of video in worship, especially the prevalence of livestreaming, a group of the church's leaders may actually sit down and watch a recording of the service to review how things are going. Or the entire congregation may be asked to offer input about the church's services. A survey is distributed to the worshipers, asking for their comments and suggestions. This might include questions such as: How was the overall flow of the worship service? Did the service have a theme or focus that held together all the different parts? Were forms of multimedia incorporated into the service appropriately? Do the individuals leading in the service seem organized and prepared? Are children and youth engaged as active participants in the order of worship? What parts of the service would you recommend changing or adjusting?

Now you may have noticed that for the most part, all this worship evaluation and assessment is taking place among ourselves. In other words, we're telling one another

what we think about our services. But what if we invited God into this conversation? What if we handed God a worship evaluation form and asked him for his honest opinion about our Sunday gatherings? That sort of changes the whole dynamic, doesn't it?

That's the dynamic we see unfolding in today's Scripture passage from Isaiah. In our text, God's people are experiencing despair and anger over their sins. They feel that God isn't taking notice of them, that God has abandoned them in their exile. They're living under the thumb of foreign oppressors. Their city is in ruins. Their temple has been destroyed. They've been treated unjustly, and they want God to come to them in saving righteousness. So they worship. They pray. They seek God's renewed favor and presence.

As they worship, God's people complain that they've been deprived of justice. They contend that they're doing what they're supposed to do, what they've been commanded to do. They're gathering, and singing, and praying, and reading Scripture, and giving, and preaching, and all the other things that go into a good worship service. They've got Sunday mornings down pat. So why isn't God showing up?

One of the answers to this question surfaces when we look closely at the opening verses in our text. God says to the prophet, "For day after day they seek me out; they *seem* eager to know my ways, *as if* they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and *seem* eager for God to come near them" (v. 2). Notice how God indicts his people for *seeming* to be a certain way, for *appearing* to be a certain kind of community. In other words, as one preacher has put it, God's people are guilty of "as if" worship.¹ They're worshipping *as if* they're a people who actually practice righteousness. They're worshipping *as if* they're a people who are going to do the will of God in response to the suffering of others. They're worshipping *as if* they're a people who reflect the character of God in their public life beyond the rituals of their congregation. So God's people stand under God's indictment for their *as if* worship.

The problem is that their ethical life, individually and together, has come unhinged from their worship life. They worship a God of mercy and justice, yet they aren't showing mercy and seeking justice for the poor and the oppressed. They've mastered the things that need to be done within the house of the Lord, but they aren't extending their faith commitment beyond the walls of their sanctuary and into the social and economic spheres of their lives. Rather than seeking the welfare of others, they're seeking only what's for their good, what's in their interest. This is why God seems far away.

One preacher tells the story about a homeless man who showed up for church service one Sunday, dressed in his street clothes, carrying his bags of stuff, and plopped down on the front pew. Before the service started, the pastor came up to him and said, "Sir, I'm not sure what you're thinking, but remember that this is the house of God. So why don't you go out this week and ask God what he thinks you should wear to church. A week passed and the next Sunday the man returned to church, still dressed in his street clothes, bags in hand, sitting on the front pew again. The pastor came over to him and said, "Well, did you do what I told you to do?" And the man answered, "Yes I did. And God said that he didn't know, because he had never been to your church."²

The way that a congregation pursues righteousness and gives itself away in response to the suffering and brokenness of others is a measure of the sincerity of its worship. Not just how you and I would measure the character of our worship, but how God would measure the character of our worship. In our text from Isaiah, notice that the reforms God demands of his people aren't reforms in their worship technique. In fact, God's people are already experts at that. They're extremely diligent about doing what God has taught them to do in

congregational worship. That's why God doesn't say to them, "You know, if you want me to come to you with salvation, then you need to do some fine tuning on your morning service. You need to work on your blend of contemporary and traditional music. You need to move the announcements to this part of the service. You need to rethink the way that you pass out the elements during the Lord's Supper. You need to preach more from this part of the Bible. And last of all you need to make sure the water in your baptismal pool is a little warmer."

Instead, God says, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I" (v. 6-9a).

Now this doesn't mean that worship is a minor thing. It doesn't mean that we should lock the church doors and put up a sign that says from now on we're closed on Sundays so we can be out in the world working for the justice and peace of God's kingdom. Congregational worship is still part of what God has called us to do as his people in Christ. And he has called us to do it well. To plan for it, to prepare for it, and to be present for it, to participate in it. Today's Scripture isn't grounds for treating worship lightly or doing it sloppily. Rather, it's a stinging reminder that worship isn't an end in itself. Instead, it's a means for us to offer God the praise and thanks that are due him, and to be transformed into people who reflect, individually and together, his character and purpose in the world.

In our church, like so many other congregations, the pastor is often the last one to leave the building on Sunday. It's a strange, and humbling, experience to go from the energy and excitement of a building filled with fellowship to a quiet, empty space where it's just me, reviewing in my mind how things went this Lord's Day. When all the lights are out, the thermostats are set, and the doors are locked, how will we know that we did what we were supposed to do here this day? How will we know that this worship service was a success?

Will it be because attendance was up? Will it be because the service ran smoothly and we made it to the benediction without someone's cell phone going off? Will it be because our offering exceeded the weekly budget requirement? Will it be because a certain number of people came forward during the invitation? Will it be because everyone leaves the fellowship meal with food in their stomachs and smiles on their faces?

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, when we do worship evaluation, we tend to do it primarily from our vantage point. We talk to self, or to one another, about our assessments. And that's good and necessary. We need to stay alert to how we can improve the ways we offer ourselves to God here on Sunday morning. But what if we leave the ultimate worship evaluation up to God? After all, when all is said and done, God will pronounce the final judgment on our gatherings. So it's best that we ask, "God, what do you think of our worship?"

God's response will have a lot to do with how we answer not only the call to worship but especially the call to righteousness. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday" (vv. 9b-10). Remember that he measures us not just by

whether we get our worship right but most of all by whether we get our lives right. He evaluates us not only by whether we show up here on Sunday morning but especially by whether we show up in the places where there's suffering and need and lostness. He assesses us on whether our ways reflect his ways, whether our priorities reflect his priorities, and whether our character reflects his character to the world.

¹ Mark Labberton, "The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice," in a 2012 symposium at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.

² Shane Claiborne, in "Dirty Theology," a sermon delivered on April 3, 2011 at Duke Chapel in Durham, North Carolina.