

What Is The Worship That Truly Pleases God



The title we have given to these materials is meant to trip readers up ever so slightly. The premise most preachers take for granted is that they will preach about the evil of mass incarceration to their congregation, and it goes without saying that in most cases the congregants won't be physically restricted. Most preachers do not preach to "captives" in that sense. Yet the assumption made here is that many of the sincere believers who come to church regularly are nevertheless held captive to some degree to ideas about crime and "criminals" that are part of this culture's dominant narrative. That narrative insists that we lock a lot of people up in the United States because we have a lot of bad people here. And further,

that locking them up has made us significantly safer over the past 40 years.

To use a word that our 16th president used most appropriately in 1862, we must "disenthrall" ourselves in relation to this narrative. White people in particular must look squarely at the hard-to-miss racial dimension within the narrative. And all of us must seriously interrogate the part of us that is content with a system in which we respond to violence and threat with yet more violence and threat: a way of engaging others that is about as far removed from the Jesus way as can be imagined. We must, in theologian Walter Brueggemann's words, "emancipate our imaginations" in order to participate in the larger emancipatory project.

Texts in this series:

- [Luke 4:18-19 – Jesus Identifies Himself with Radical Liberation](#)
- [Luke 14:24 – Unexpected Guests at God's Abundant Table](#)
- [Luke 15:11-32 – Welcoming the Prodigal's Return](#)
- [John 8: 1-11 – Neither Do I Condemn You](#)
- [Mt. 7:1-5 – The Measure You Give Is the Measure You Get](#)
- [Mt. 12:1-14 – Higher Laws](#)
- [Mt. 18:21-35 Forgiveness Without Limit](#)
- [Mt. 26:59-60 – The Trial of Jesus: Justice or "Just Us?"](#)
- [Jeremiah 31:29/Ezekiel 18:2 – No Multi-Generational Curse](#)

Please note that the 10 preaching texts have been developed for use in Christian pulpits. Materials relevant to other faith traditions will be forthcoming.

IX. Hosea 6:6 & Isaiah 58:6-9 – The "Worship" That Is Pleasing to God

Yet day after day they see me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God.

The second major section of Isaiah (chapters 40-66) was composed just before and after the deliverance of the exiled people from Babylon. Chapters 40-55 exhibit strong elements of excitement and hope, as it has now become evident that Babylon is about to fall to King Cyrus of Persia. Chapters 56-66, sometimes referred to as "Third Isaiah," contain messages of comfort, consolation, and instruction to the restored people, who struggle to build a just community and restore temple worship in Jerusalem.

Hosea, on the other hand, was composed during a much earlier period—before the fall of the northern kingdom (Israel) and during a time when that kingdom was already engaged in a losing struggle with Assyria. Unlike Amos, who decries Israel's corruption as an outsider from Judah, Hosea was an insider who was deeply grieved by the chaos and corruption he witnessed.

What is interesting, therefore, is how these different texts written at different times and under different circumstances nevertheless match up remarkably on one central point: that God is not in the least pleased by "correct" ritual observance—and is even insulted by it—unless the people are committed first and foremost to doing justice and showing mercy.

Both passages are blunt about this. Hosea sees the doom of his people right in front of him. God's dire judgment is certain for both Israel and Judah on account of their "whoredom"; there will be no stopping it. But Hosea also looks forward to God's eventual restoration of the people, as God's tenderheartedness trumps everything else in Hosea's conception of the matter.

It is highly significant that Jesus chooses to quote Hosea 6:6 in his dispute with the religious authorities over what kind of behavior is permitted on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:7). In Hosea, "steadfast love" and "the knowledge of God" are significantly equated: to really know God means to behave with God-like compassion and mercy. Burnt offerings are beside the point. They will not please God, and will even offend God, in the absence of right ethical relations.

Isaiah 58 goes more deeply into the offensiveness of showing correct ritual observance when the underlying ethics of the community are fouled. Isaiah has God saying, in effect, "How dare you try to draw near to me by fasting when on your fast day you are oppressing your workers and contemplating violence against your enemies?" Rather, the kind of worship or "fast" that God desires and expects is worship expressed through works of mercy and justice: specifically, lifting the yoke of oppression for those who work and providing bread for the hungry, housing for the homeless, and clothing for the naked.

Question for the Preacher's Meditation and Preparation

- As a worship leader, do I have the guts to tell my congregants that dressing up and going to church actually constitutes a very minor part of being a godly person and that it certainly won't "save" someone who refuses to change his/her life? (A famous preacher, William Sloane Coffin, used to quip that going to church no more makes someone a Christian than being in a garage makes you a car.)
- Do I dare to say from the pulpit that the main "devotion" shown by would-be faithful Christians must always be about ethical behavior—about showing compassion and doing justice and even about breaking down the social structures that create oppression?
- Can I see clearly how the messages of Hosea and Isaiah regarding "right worship" are identical to the core teaching of the Jesus who excoriates all outward displays of piety that are not matched by works of mercy?
- Releasing the "bonds of injustice," letting the oppressed "go free," breaking "every yoke": in the current social context, what meanings do these expressions have for me? Specifically, how do I interpret these mandates in relation to the "New Jim Crow" regime of mass incarceration?

Possible Homiletic Directions

- Confess humbly that it is very hard for a preacher leading a worship service to interrogate whether public worship is what God is most interested in—whether public worship might even be offensive to God under certain circumstances.
- Tease out the "Sunday-Monday" angle: that Sunday's observance is meaningless if Monday remains unchanged by it.
- Raise the question of whether it might actually be dangerous to make a Sunday "show" of one's faithfulness if the worshipper is actually *unfaithful* in relation to the ethical fundamentals.
- Use the convergence of these texts with the teachings of Jesus regarding outward piety to make the point that there is really only one "testament" in relation to how to please and serve God.
- Use Isaiah 58:6 to explore in depth how tearing down the "New Jim Crow" system would constitute the highest and best worship of God in this time and place.