

Isaiah 1:10-20  
God's Desire: Worship from the Heart  
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When Jesus was talking with the Samaritan woman at the well in John chapter four, He made a most remarkable statement. Jesus said,

John 4:23-24

- 23 "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.
- 24 "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Again, that is a most remarkable statement. Jesus is here talking about God, the omnipotent Lord of the universe who can call worlds into existence by the word of His mouth. Jesus is here talking about the high and exalted God who is clothed in impenetrable light of such brightness that no one can look upon Him and live. Jesus is here talking about the holy God who is surrounded by innumerable hosts of flaming angels who cry out day and night, "Holy, holy, holy!" Jesus is here talking about the one living and true God, the sovereign Lord who is dependent upon no one beyond Himself and who is bound by no limitations beyond faithfulness to Himself. Jesus said that this God is seeking true worshipers who will worship Him in spirit and truth. Here is one of the sublime mysteries of Scripture. Our

independent, self-sufficient God who is the very fullness of glory is seeking true worshipers to glorify Him through a certain type of worship.

I deliberately said, “through a certain type of worship.” God desires not just any old worship but a certain kind of worship. God desires worship in spirit and truth. Worship in truth refers to worship which meets a certain objective standard. That objective standard is God’s revelation in Scripture of how God Himself wants to be worshiped. The true worshiper wants to give God the sort of worship God enjoys. The true worshiper determines what sort of worship God enjoys not based on his own ideas about what sort of worship God should enjoy and not based what sort of worship he most enjoys participating in and not based what sort of worship he thinks will attract the largest crowd but based upon what God has revealed in the Bible about the sort of worship God enjoys receiving.

Early in our marriage, Mary gave me a surprise birthday party. She enjoyed the party, and she sincerely thought I would enjoy it as well. She soon learned that I am too much of an introvert to enjoy being the center of attention at a party, and she accepted me as I am. She hasn’t given me a surprise birthday party in decades because she wants to do what truly pleases me on my birthday. That is the same basic attitude we should have toward our worship of God when we assemble with the saints on the Lord’s Day. We should want to worship God in a way which truly pleases Him.

God also desires worship in spirit. This refers to the inward, subjective aspect of worship. God wants worship that is sincere, worship that is from the depths of the heart, worship that is in integrity without any hypocrisy. God is concerned with more than the outward form of our worship. God is also concerned with the spirit in which it is given.

Worship that is in truth but not in spirit is like scalded Jello pudding. I love Jello pudding, but not when the cook has scalded the milk. Scalded pudding smells terrible and tastes terrible and should be thrown in the trash. It is the right thing prepared in the wrong way. And that is the way our worship is when we do it in the right outward form but our spirit is not in it properly.

To sum this up, worship that is not in truth is false worship, and worship that is not in spirit is hollow worship, shallow worship, worship with no real substance.

Our passage for today is about worship that is correct in its outward form -- it is worship in truth -- but not correct in its inner spirit. It is hypocritical worship. It is the worship equivalent of scalded Jello pudding, and God rejects it as worse than worthless.

We will look at our passage today under three headings: the repudiation, the reason and the remedy. I might mention that each of these headings is related to a statement in our passage about blood or the color red. The first heading is repudiation, and we read in verse 11, "I do not delight in the blood of bulls."

The second heading is the reason, and we read in verse 15, “Your hands are full of blood.” The third point is the remedy, and we read in verse 18, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

Let’s begin looking at our first point, **the repudiation**. You might remember from last week’s sermon that God has severely criticized the nation of Judah. The substance of the criticism is found in verse four where God calls Judah a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed consisting of evildoers, and sons who are corrupters. We have here four carefully chosen nouns which summarize God’s goodness to Judah as God’s covenant people: nation, people, seed and sons. These four nouns are then modified to express Judah’s betrayal of her heritage through her fall into sin. Judah is a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed consisting of evildoers, and sons who are corrupters.

Some in Judah might have objected to this criticism by pointing to the temple in Jerusalem and to Judah’s faithfulness in maintaining the orthodox ritual of the temple. They might have reasoned, “Isaiah’s message can’t be a true prophecy. How could God speak so harshly about a people who worship God so frequently, who worship God with such fervor, who worship God in such faithful conformity to the law of Moses?” Isaiah gives God’s answer to such an argument. God says, “I repudiate your worship! I reject it entirely! It gives me no pleasure!”

Verses 11 through 15 express in vivid, forceful terms God's rejection of their worship. The purpose of the Mosaic sacrifices was to worship God, but God says that their numerous sacrifices are nothing to Him. In fact, God is fed up with their sacrifices. God feels toward their sacrifices like a person feels toward food when he has overeaten to the point that food repulses him. Their sacrificial worship is futile, vain; it serves no real purpose. In fact, their incense which should cause the smoke of their sacrifices to be a sweet smelling savor before God has become a nauseous stench to God. It is an abomination to God. They come into God's temple to appear before Him in worship, but God has come to regard them as unwelcome intruders who are trampling His courts and profaning His temple.

God summarizes the whole of the Mosaic worship system in these verses. There were the weekly worship assemblies on the Sabbath, and monthly worship assemblies at the time of the new moon, and more assemblies at the appointed religious feasts throughout the year. God says that these worship assemblies, which should be a delight to God, have become a wearisome burden to Him. Instead of being a pleasure, they have become for God a trial to be endured. Receiving their worship should have been a profound pleasure for God like sitting down to enjoy a gourmet meal. Instead it had become a painful experience like sitting down in a dentist's chair to endure a root canal. Instead of loving their worship assemblies, God has come to hate them to the very depths of His divine soul. When they lift up their hands in worship before God, God turns away His eyes and does not acknowledge their worship. When they pray to God, God closes His ears and does not listen to their requests. God is beyond not accepting their worship; He repudiates it.

That brings us to our second point, which is **the reason** for the repudiation of their worship. Now notice the reasons which are not given. There is nothing said about neglecting God's worship, nothing said about failing to come to God's temple at the appointed times. There is nothing said about departing from the worship guidelines given in the law of Moses, nothing said about worshipping God with strange fire or worshipping God through an idolatrous golden calf. There is nothing said about bringing blemished or sickly animals for sacrifices. Apparently the worship was being conducted in faithful conformity to the law of Moses. And yet God still repudiates it. Why is that?

The reason is that it is not enough for worship to be worship in truth. That is necessary but it is not sufficient. Worship must also be worship in spirit. Their worship was not worship in spirit because it was filled with hypocrisy. They were trying to worship God in their religious assemblies without meeting the obligations of the covenant in their daily lives.

Let me explain that. It was a great privilege to be a member of God's covenant people under the old covenant. Paul lists some of these privileges for us in Romans chapter 9, verse 4. There was the national adoption of Israel. There was the shekinah glory of God which indwelt the holy of holies. There were the covenants which God made with Abraham and David. There was the law which God gave through Moses. There was the temple worship service which God entrusted to Israel alone. And there were the promises of a coming Messianic Redeemer. These were the privileges which God had given His covenant people as a group.

With such privileges came responsibilities. To enjoy the blessings of the covenant, God's people as individuals had to meet the obligations of the covenant. These were faith, repentance and new obedience. This is just another way of saying true saving faith. True saving faith necessarily bears the fruits of repentance and new obedience. We are justified through faith alone, but this faith never exists alone, never exists in isolation from its necessary fruits. When we turn to Jesus in faith for salvation from our sin, we are in the process turning away from our sin in repentance. When we are in a saving union with Jesus through faith, Jesus gives us new desire and ability to live as God would have us live. Thus repentance and new obedience are the necessary fruits of genuine saving faith.

Not everyone in the covenant community meets the obligation of the covenant. Some even rebel against God and live in open sin. At some point, God is going to judge such people and even cut them off from His people. Isaiah was ministering at a time when most of the covenant people were in rebellion against God and when God's judgment upon them was imminent.

Look at verse 10. This verse says that the nation of Judah, both rulers and people, were living like the sinful people of Sodom and Gomorrah. A person can't live a life characterized by perverse and violent sins and then expect God to accept his worship just because he is outwardly still a member of God's covenant people. Such worship is hypocritical, and God does not accept it.

The book of Hebrews says that it is impossible to please God without faith. Faith is looking to Jesus alone for salvation, looking to Jesus alone to forgive one's sins and to deliver one's life from the power of sin. This sort of faith is not something we can exercise selectively and partially. We can't refuse to exercise faith in the sense of trusting Jesus to deliver us from the power of sin because we don't want to be delivered from our sinful ways, and then expect to be able to trust Jesus to forgive our sins. We can't trust Jesus as our priest who will forgive our sins and make our worship acceptable to God but then refuse to trust Jesus as our prophet because we don't want Him to tell us God's will for our lives and refuse to trust Jesus as our king because we don't want Him to have any authority over us. We can't trust Jesus without trusting Him as a whole Person who is prophet, priest and king. We can't divide Jesus up and trust Him selectively and partially.

Saving faith is also not something a person can turn on and off at will. A person can't live a life of practical atheism, transgressing God's law as if God does not exist, and then suddenly become a person of faith when he walks into a church. A person can't live through the week dominated by sin, under the power of sin, and then become a person of faith when he tries to worship. A person can't refuse during the week to look to Jesus in faith for the power to live right, and then expect to be able to go to church and look to Jesus in faith for the power to worship right.

We can't live a life of sinful disobedience to God, and then think we can make everything right by going to church for

worship. Worship apart from faith is just a meaningless mockery, just a vain going through the motions. Such worship does not appease God. Such worship appalls God.

Look at verse 15. A person spreads out his hands as a gesture of worship before God, but those hands are full of the blood of sinful violence. Such worship is hypocritical, and God does not accept it.

We read about the sort of worship which God does accept in Psalm 24:

Psalm 24:3-5

- 3 Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place?
- 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully.
- 5 He shall receive blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

We find a similar message from Paul in 1 Timothy 2:8:

- 8 I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting;

We have looked at the repudiation where God said, “I do not delight in the blood of bulls.” We have looked at the reason where God said, “Your hands are full of blood. We will lastly look at **the remedy**. The remedy is for Judah as the covenant people to meet the obligations of the covenant. They need to believe and then bear the fruit of that faith in their daily lives.

Now I said that the obligations of the covenant are faith, repentance and new obedience. God stresses in verses 16 and 17 the need for new obedience. This is summarized in the commands, “Cease to do evil, learn to do good.” Now we mustn’t interpret this in a legalistic sense. God isn’t here saying that we must stop doing wrong and start doing right in order to earn His acceptance. God isn’t here telling people to depend upon themselves to change their lives, to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and to transform their own lives by raw, unaided will power. No, not at all. We must interpret Scripture with Scripture, and the Bible clearly teaches that people are enslaved to sin and unable to save themselves in their own power. We must interpret these verses in a context of grace. God is here commanding people to live the sanctified life which is only possible through a faith relationship with Jesus. This is an indirect way of challenging people to look to Jesus in faith.

When presenting the gospel, sometimes the Bible commands people to believe on the Lord Jesus and be saved. These are direct challenges to look to Jesus in faith. Other times the Bible commands people to live the life that is possible only through a faith relationship with Jesus, to do things which are the inevitable and necessary result of a faith relationship with Jesus. For example, the Bible commands, Repent and be baptized; turn to God and do works befitting repentance; deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Jesus, and so on. These are indirect challenges to look to Jesus in faith.

When we are in a faith relationship with Jesus, we will stop living the life dominated by sin, and we will start the long process of learning how to live a life dominated by righteousness. The examples of sanctified living given here in Isaiah are putting away their former evil doings and then seeking justice, rebuking the oppressor, defending the fatherless, and pleading for the widow.

Now the person who is sanctified is also the person who is justified, because both justification and sanctification are through faith and because both justification and sanctification are based on our saving union with Christ. If we have one, though they are different, we will also have the other. Sanctification is the work of Christ in us to give us a new heart and make us a new person. Justification is the work of Christ for us to give us a new legal record before God. If we have one of these, we will have the other also because both are through faith in Christ.

Here in Isaiah, God first challenged people to live the sanctified life, something that is possible only through a faith relationship with Jesus. Then God shared with the people a little divine reasoning. This message may be foolishness to an unbelieving world, but it is the very wisdom of God. God said,

Isaiah 1:18

18 “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

Here is God's reasoning. People who cease to do evil and learn to do good are living the sanctified life. This is possible only through the power of a faith relationship with Jesus. And people who believe in Jesus are also justified. Though their sins are the deepest red, representing the violent shedding of innocent blood, God now regards their legal record as being the whitest of whites. That is to say, the legal slate has been erased, the legal record has been purged based on the death of Christ as a payment for their sins. And now God reckons to their legal account the snow white righteousness of Christ, His legal record based on His life of perfect obedience.

Verse 18 is not talking about the progressive work of sanctification which is never completely finished in this life. This verse is talking about the instantaneous act of justification which is perfectly accomplished the moment a person believes in Jesus. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

God here puts before His people the gospel both as command and as promise. In doing so, God puts before them both life and death. If they respond to the gospel in the obedience of faith, their sins are forgiven and they have chosen life and blessing. If they respond to the gospel by rejecting it, then they have chosen death and cursing. Their old sinful record remains, and they have added to it the serious sin of rejecting Jesus.

There is no sin so unreasonable as the sin of rejecting Jesus' sincere gospel offer. There is no sin so contrary to one's true

interest as rejecting the light of salvation because one loves the darkness of sinful living. Look to Jesus in faith. Cry out to Him for mercy. He will make you right with God. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” Jesus will enable you to cease to do evil and to learn to do good. Jesus will enable you to worship God in spirit and truth. Don’t be unreasonable. Eternity is at stake, and now is the acceptable time. It is not enough to be an outward member of God’s covenant people. To receive the blessings of the covenant, you must look to Jesus in faith. Do so today.