

The Greatest Story (Part 27):

Worthless Worship

Isaiah 1:10-20

Memory Verses: James 1:27

MANUSCRIPT

Introduction (Me, We, & the Struggle)

I don't really know exactly how I feel about the Catholic church. I've met Catholic priests who pretty much believed everything the same as me concerning salvation in Christ by grace alone through faith alone. I've also met many people who live their lives very contrary to the Christian faith and use the confessional booth as a means of absolution of their sins like its a **get out of jail free card**. Perhaps you've heard similar stories or seen movies where someone commit horrible sins, murder, rape, etc... and then they go to the confessional, tell a priest their sin and go on about their lives like nothing has changed. And if you are like me... that doesn't sit right! That doesn't compute! The religious "Hail Mary's", "Father Forgive Me's", and the occasional Mass doesn't mean you should be able to live your lives any way you so well please.

Them darn Catholics right? Well the problem with that is, we are like that too, just in more subtle ways. You see, we may not have the religious rituals of the confessional booth, or Mass, or the Rosary, but we still put a lot of stock in religious things as a way of absolving us of our sin and finding favor with God. I know way more Baptists, and Evangelical Conservatives who find their salvation in religious rituals than I do Catholics. And, when confronted with their sinful lifestyles say things like; "well I was saved," or "I was baptized," or "I am a member of such and such church," or "I was a Deacon," etc... And here's the thing... if you don't truly know Jesus and believe on him with a heart of repentance and dependence all of your religious jargon and rituals won't mean a hill of beans come the day of reckoning. **Matthew 7:21-23** – says that on the day of judgment many will say Lord, did we not do miracles in your name and then Jesus will say to them depart from me I never knew you. Religious works mean nothing compared to knowing Jesus!

And that is exactly the message of the book of Isaiah, and more specifically the message of **Isaiah chapter 1:10-20**. You see Isaiah was sent as a prophet to the nation of Judah for the specific purpose of warning the Israelites of Judah that their sinful idolatry had severe consequences. The Israelites in those days, much like many Christians today, thought that by keeping their religious observances that God would overlook their debauchery and transgressions. And Isaiah had to remind them that that was not the case at all. In fact, Isaiah tells them that if they

continue to live in sin that God would eventually lead them in to captivity, which is exactly what ends up happening.

This morning I want us to look at **Isaiah 1:10-20** and I want us to see what God wants to say to us, here in our church, specifically about our sin and our religion and how we can be people who place our faith in Christ and repent of our sin rather than merely trying to cover it up with religious works. So let's read **Isaiah 1:10-20** and what we will become apparent to us is...

Our Acts of Worship Are Worthless When They Are Merely Acts .

As you can see, this passage is unrelenting in its rebuke and forces us to make a decision as to how we will view worship. Will we view it as merely a religious action void of the love and repentance that these acts should convey or will we truly make sure that our hearts match our worship. In fact, I'm sure many of you are wondering if you've heard this message before. Well to some degree I've preached on this subject almost a dozen times. So instead of trying to find some deeper revelation let us merely focus on the scripture verse by verse and see what God is speaking to us today.

Teaching (Expand on the Problem, God)

So as we look at the first verse here we recognize that ... **The Worth of Our Worship Depends on Our View of Our Own Righteousness (vs.10)** Isaiah calls his hearers Sodom & Gomorrah. For those who may not know, this is not a good thing to be called. Being called a person from Sodom & Gomorrah is the biblical equivalent to being called a Nazi. Sodom & Gomorrah are often the measuring stick of an evil people who we assume we are nothing like and have nothing in common. They were so evil that God had to destroy them with fire from heaven. They were so evil that 10 righteous people could not be found among the entire population. There is no way we are like those evil people... right?

Well, lets take a moment to observe the specific sins for which Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. In **Joel 1:7** we are told that they were condemned because of their abundance of sexual sinfulness. This of course is the crime we often think of when thinking of these two cities. But now look at **Ezekiel 16:49-50** which tells us that the greater sin of Sodom & Gomorrah was not their sexual sinfulness but was in fact their societal selfishness. They had plenty of food, a prosperous and easy life, and yet hoarded their goodness to themselves when there were poor and needy people who could have benefited from their hospitality.

And when we look at these two sins we are struck with the hard truth... these are sins which are found within the Church universal, and perhaps even within our local church. How many people, who claim Christ as their Lord and Savior, enter into the church gathering every week while secretly engaging in sexual sins which defames the glory of God? And, how

many more churches are full of the rich and wealthy who are keen on storing up their treasures and filling their coffers while the neighborhood around them perishes in poverty? Instead of thinking that Isaiah was being too harsh... perhaps we should realize that he might have been spot on.

And, of course he isn't saying that all of his hearers are guilty of these specific sins. Not all of us are fornicators and rapists. Not all of us are selfish and neglect the poor and needy. What Isaiah is saying though, is that we are all sinful. In fact our sins are as sinful as the sins of Sodom & Gomorrah. In comparing his hearers with these two cities, Isaiah is in fact reminding them that none of us are without sin, and none of us are righteous. In fact later in his discourse Isaiah makes it rather clear in chapter 64:6 that we are all unclean and all our righteousness is actually akin to filthy rags. And this hits right at the heart of this passage. There are many people who sneer at Sodom & Gomorrah and feel that they have a higher standing with God because of their religious observances. They feel that through their sacrifices and their worship and their rituals that their sin is hidden or somehow lessened in God's eyes... and they couldn't be farther from the truth. Because the truth is this... no amount of religious rituals can atone for your sins... only faith in Christ can do that.

Our sinful state and our utter unrighteousness show us just how desperate we are for a savior. If we don't understand just how depraved we are then our self-righteous arrogance will remove us further from Christ rather than drawing us closer to him. This is why **verse 10** shows us that we need to listen to the words of the Lord; why we need to hear his teachings and be obedient to them. Our unrighteousness shows us a need for God, the word of God provides us the answers to our depraved status. So hear at the start of this passage we see the foundation for everything that follows; true worship is a worship that recognizes God's grace & not our works, as the means of our salvation. **A clear understanding of our own unrighteousness places the focus of our worship directly on the righteous one.** And so we see... **Our Acts of Worship Are Worthless When They Are Merely Acts.** When we worship through religious actions while still maintaining our self-righteousness it's just an act.

Moving on, the next thing we see in **verses 11-15** is that ... **The Worth of Our Worship Is Deemed so Based Not on the Quantity But on the Quality (vs.11-15).** Notice in **vs.11** that God considers the multitude of Isaiah's hearers sacrifices and says he has had enough of their burnt offerings. Now, as we've been going through the Bible we've seen some pretty outrageous displays that could be described as multitudes of sacrifices. I think of Solomon dedicated 150,000 burnt

offerings at the dedication of the temple. That is a lot of dead animals. And all of those dead animals are for one specific reason; burnt offerings are for the atoning of sin. But here we see a conflict. What we thought was a sure fire way for the sins of the Israelites to be atoned for... God now says is not enough. In fact this very passage shows us that the act of the sacrifice itself is not what atones for sins at all. You see... there must also be a spiritual aspect. In addition to the animal sacrifice, a sacrifice of ones heart is required. The religious are happy to do the ritual and easily forget about the the heart change that the ritual symbolizes. You see... God doesn't delight in the death and the blood of animals alone – that would be sadistic. Remember he created these animals; he loves these animals. Their death must mean something, and without repentance and brokenness their death means nothing. God grows very weary of a bunch of dead animals which have died in vain because the hearts of the ones committing the sacrifice remain unchanged. You must understand this... they could sacrifice as many animals as they wanted to and it would make no difference at all if their hearts weren't repentant. **God isn't concerned about how religious you can seem, he's concerned about how repentant you truly are.**

What are our sacrifices to God? And, what are our worship services to God? Look at **vs.12-14**. Here God compares our church gatherings to a trampling of his court. Where traditionally we have wrestled with wether kids running in the sanctuary or adults drinking coffee or the pastor wearing jeans was the most irreverent thing that could happen in God's house; here we see that the most irreverent thing is actually people worshipping in his house who's hearts don't match their actions. Did you know that our church gatherings can actually be a mockery to God. If church is just a religious obligation or attended with the wrong motivations and without the right reverence God considers it an insult. In fact it would be better if we didn't come to church at all. He continues in **verse 13**. Our religious traditions and offerings can be a slap in his face. What good is incense with insolence? What good are church gatherings without graciousness? What good are fellowships without faithfulness? You see... Instead of bringing God Glory and giving him joy our fake worship is a burden and an abomination to him; something which his soul hates. We think we are doing God a favor or earning his favor when we attend "church" but in a great irony we are actually spurning his wrath against us. **Have you even considered the fact that there are worship services in God's name and acts of worship directed towards Him that He actually hates?**

Moving on to **vs.15**; what are our praises and prayers to God? How do we even comprehend what we are seeing here. They will lift their hands in worship and he will hide his face from them. It's interesting to note that in our American church culture hand raising has become the most obvious way to show you are "worshipping" God. But I wonder, how many times is it done for show or without thought of repentance and brokenness. God

doesn't care about you lifting your hands... he cares about you lifting your heart. And when they pray he will not listen. A God who doesn't hear prayers? That doesn't seem right. But, sometimes our prayers are selfish instead of God glorifying aren't they. And sometimes our prayers are like the pharisees and are merely for show. And sometimes our prayers are without true confession and repentance. And can we actually expect a Holy God to truly listen to that? Especially when those aren't real prayers at all. The point is simple... we must make sure that the physical actions of our worship match our hearts or they are merely acts. **Our Acts of Worship Are Worthless When They Are Merely Acts .**

And then at the end of **verse 15** Isaiah's message shifts a little from the form of worship to the meaning of worship and we see... **The Worth of Our Worship is Determined by The Way We Live Rather Than The Way We Look (vs.15-17)**. Worship is a lifestyle not a temporary posture and so your worship will be shown through how you live your life Monday through Saturday and not as much on how you act on Sundays. If you are sinful it will be revealed, the blood on your hands will become apparent. Not blood from murder, but the blood that atones for sin will be returned upon you regardless of your sin. You can hide under religion some of the time but you cannot hide a lifestyle of pursuing selfish pleasures. You can hide under religion some of the time but you can't hide from a lifestyle void of compassion for the needy and poor. Isaiah reminds us to seek justice and correct oppression. Those virtues are within not without. If you are a blood bought saint it will be revealed because you will be someone who fights for those who can't fight for themselves. Christians should carry the banner of helping the oppressed, marginalized, and the discriminated. Here there are two specific people mentioned; Orphans and Widows. Interestingly enough these are the same two types of people that James mentions in **James 1:27** . He says specifically that true religion is when you put your faith into action. True worship is when your life proclaims through actions the words you proclaim through the songs you sing on Sunday. So... are you living for yourself or for others? It, reveals a lot about your worship if you aren't. **Do you want to merely look like a worshiper on Sunday or do you want to be a true worshiper by the way you live your life? Our Acts of Worship Are Worthless When They Are Merely Acts**

Lastly we see the Gospel in verses **18-20**. Here we see that ... **The Worth of Our Worship is Defined by Our Obedience To Christ (vs.18-20)**. You see there is a way to a relationship with God. There is a way to be restored to the conversation with Him. And within that relationship your sin is atoned for. Not by the blood of bulls, but by the blood of Christ and the consecration of your heart and faith placed in that

blood. Now your scarlet sins can be made white as snow. Now, your red crimson stains can be made as wool. There is now no blood on your hands because all the blood has been atoned for by the blood of Christ.

How do we come into a relationship with Christ and enter into that conversation? The way is obedience. Here at Third Avenue one of our core values is Authentic Worship which we define as such... **Worship is a lifestyle of joyful obedience not reluctant observance.** When we choose to faithfully obey God and trust in the sacrifice of his Son Jesus Christ we become a true worshiper who joyfully obeys our Lord and worships him in spirit and in truth. What some do just as an act we now do as an act of love. And this obedience proves we are true worshippers because when we refuse to obey God we clearly aren't his follower and in the end will be destroyed. No religious actions can replace a heart of obedience. **Our Acts of Worship Are Worthless When They Are Merely Acts**

Application (Resolution, You)

The application is simple. Are you using religion as a get out of jail free card? Are you using religion as a way to atone for your sins. Is your worship based on you or on Christ? Are you faking your walk with Christ by following the religious rules and partaking in the religious activities but not having the heart that should accompany those things?

If so then God will not only not accept your worship... but instead hates your worship. It is worthless and disgraceful. You think you are doing something that earns you favor with God and instead you are condemning yourself further.

Conclusion

So what's the cure to worthless worship? Turn over with me to **Psalm 51**. This is the heart that should accompany worship. Look specifically at **vs.16-19** . Here the Psalmist recognizes the same thing that Isaiah points out... God will not delight in sacrifices or be pleased with a burnt offerings that are not authentic. So the cure is this... a broken and contrite heart O God you will not despise. And then you will delight in the burnt offerings once again. Once our hearts are in the right place, broken, dependent, contrite, passionate, repentant, loving, and desiring... then our worship, our acts of religion, our services, our sacrifices, our communions, etc... become very pleasing to our Lord. Worship is worthless without the right heart. **Our Acts of Worship Are Worthless When They Are Merely Acts**