

WORSHIP DURING THE CRISIS: LET IT ROLL!

I really miss worshipping with you here in this Church. It is hard to believe that this the sixth Sunday that we have not been able to come together into God's House to worship the Lord. And it really makes you appreciate the freedom that we have to worship in this country. And if anything good comes out of this coronavirus crisis, it may be that God's people will not take this freedom for granted. And while I was thinking about this, I came across a passage in the Book of Amos that indicates that the worship of God is not something limited to a church building; nor is worship limited to just one day a week. In fact, the Prophet Amos gave us important insights from God that we do not want to miss—particularly during these trying times in which we find ourselves.

Amos gave his prophecy to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in about 760 B.C. And, it is amazing just how much this ancient scripture speaks directly to our country today. And I suppose the reason for that is that the historical context in which the prophecy was given is so much like the atmosphere that has pervaded our country for many years now—long before this COVID-19 ever descended upon us. The people of Israel had begun to take their worship of God for granted. Oh, they showed up at their temples on the Sabbath to worship, and they observed all the religious holidays and great Jewish feasts—that much was true. But all they were doing was going through the motions. They brought all kinds of burnt offerings of bulls, sheep and goats—sometimes even birds. They presented grain offerings from their harvests. The priest would splash an animal's blood on the altar for their "peace" or "fellowship" offering. And, they even played beautiful music and sang songs together when they entered the temple. They did all these things "**religiously**". And, yet they weren't worshipping God, not really. Rather, they were merely practicing rituals with no heartfelt devotion—no real faith in God. Perhaps this was because they had been living in a time of great economic prosperity and international peace, like the ones that we have been living in until this latest crisis. Things were so good that, in their hearts, they really felt like they did not need God anymore. Rather, all of the blessings that they had, they believed came from their own efforts and, as far as they were concerned, God had nothing to do with it. It's amazing how many people feel like that today.

And it was in that historical context that Amos delivered the Word of God to the people of Israel. He told them several things that God had against them, but this is the crux of what God spoke through Amos about their lackadaisical worship: ²¹ "***I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.***" ²² ***Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not***

accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. ²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.” Amos 5:21-23 (NIV)

You see, God didn't want His people taking worship for granted. He didn't want them merely going through the motions with empty religious rituals accompanied by equally empty hearts. So what did God want from His people in the form of acceptable worship? Well, Amos gave it to them straight—just as he gives it to us straight today. If you want to worship God in faith and in truth, then Amos proclaims that you must: **“Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”** Amos 5:24 (NIV) Amos is saying that to worship in a manner pleasing to God, it requires two things. First of all, you must let **“justice roll like a river”** and, secondly, you have to allow **“righteousness to flow like a never-failing stream.”** Have you ever heard of **worship** being described in such terms as **“justice”** and **“righteousness”**?

Well, let's think about what God is demanding here. This requirement to further the cause of **justice** is an earmark of what it means to be a true child of God. Too often, we think of God's justice as being solely connected to God's wrath and judgment in the punitive sense. Certainly, the Bible teaches us about the reality of the fact that those who reject God and His commandments will, indeed, suffer God's judgment. And if you read the Book of Amos in its entirety, you cannot fail to see this aspect of justice.

But justice, in the biblical sense, also deals with the giving of certain **benefits** and how these benefits are shared fairly throughout the members of society. Different cultures see to it that these benefits are shared in different ways. In some societies, who receives the benefits (the good things of life, so to speak) is determined by what social class you are born in. For example, in a monarchy, if you were part of the nobility you'd get a vast majority of the benefits conferred within that society. Or in a capitalist society, benefits are distributed largely based upon one's ability or merit. In a totalitarian society, benefits are hoarded by those at the top of the heap, and shared to some limited extent with those supportive of the governing regime. That is the way that a few of the worldly systems distribute **benefits** among its people. But the Bible offers a **radically different system**—one in which justice is achieved and benefits are distributed according to **one's needs**. And because of this, God's concept of societal justice is actually a combination of **love and grace**. We see this all throughout the Bible. For instance, Deuteronomy 10:18 gives a good example of this when it tells us that God **“defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing.”** (NIV)¹

So, when Amos says to let **“justice roll like a river”**—he is identifying one of the best ways to show your praise and thankfulness to God by passing forward to others in need a portion of those

blessings (benefits) that God has given to you. Justice in this context relates to how we treat our fellow human beings—not just on Sunday, but on every day of the week. As Old Testament scholar Trent Butler puts it: “[*True worshippers of God*] cannot take advantage of their neighbor on Monday, cheat on a business deal on Tuesday, tell a bunch of lies on Wednesday, cheat on their spouse on Thursday, get in a fight with their friend on Friday, take off on a drunken tangent on Saturday, and then worship on Sunday.”² In this way, those who obey the Lord truly worship Him by the way in which they live out their daily lives.

This biblical idea of practicing justice by sharing our material things, as well as our efforts, based upon a person’s individual needs then transitions into the concept of righteousness. And so, the pursuit of justice and righteousness is what we engage in as we seek to know God who also blesses us according to our needs. The problem is that we so often fail to realize what our true needs are, and yet God supplies us with exactly what we need when we actively pursue His justice and righteousness. So how do we get from justice to righteousness? Well, we can see this transition in the words of another prophet, Hosea, when he says: “*Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love [from which justice comes], and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until He comes and showers righteousness on you.*” Hosea 10:12 (NIV)

So, what is this “*righteousness*” that God requires before we can truly worship Him? Well, it is an attitude one adopts whereby the righteous person’s security in life is not based upon the circumstances surrounding them (whether they are good or bad), but rather in their faith and trust in God. Another prophet, Habakkuk, describes this form of righteousness by contrasting those who trust in the Lord with those who, in their arrogance, only trust in their own efforts. Habakkuk tells us: “*Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked. But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God.*” Habakkuk 2:4 (NLT2) In the New Testament, we can see that the Apostle Paul agrees wholeheartedly with Habakkuk when Paul uses the example of Abraham’s great faith that translated into righteousness. In Romans 4, Paul says: ³ “*For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’*” Romans 4:3 (NET1)

So, true worship of God requires us to develop an *attitude of righteousness*. However, note this—we are not talking about a “*self-righteous*” attitude. Rather, a self-righteous attitude must be strictly avoided because it is the opposite of the *humble righteousness* demanded by God when we worship Him. Self-righteousness is the attitude of people who are proud, arrogant and judgmental—and God doesn’t want you to be any of those things. But, the righteousness required for worship is the

ability to see our blessings as coming from God, and not a product of our own efforts, and to trust that God will continue to bless us as long as we have faith in Him.

And with that in mind, I found the recent statements of New York Governor Andrew Cuomo so very disappointing. As you know, the State of New York has been hit much harder by the pandemic than many other areas of the country. And finally some good news came as data indicated that the number of new cases of the coronavirus were beginning to decrease in New York. And reflecting upon this, Cuomo stressed that the cases were on decline **“because we brought the number down.”** Now, if he had just left it at that maybe it would not have been too bad. But, just in case somebody didn’t understand what he meant, he continued on and further emphasized this when he insisted: **“God did not do that. Faith did not do that. Destiny did not do that. A lot of pain and suffering did that.”**³ Now how do you answer someone when they make a godless statement like that? Who can we turn to for a biblical response to such blasphemy? Well, I think that David in a couple of his Psalms gives an appropriate reply. Psalm 108 puts the Cuomo’s of this world in their place: ¹² **“[God] give us aid against the enemy, for the help of man is worthless.”** ¹³ **With God we will gain the victory, and He will trample down our enemies.”** Psalm 108:12-13 (NIV) And Psalm 118 tells who we can, and who we cannot, trust when the chips are down: ⁸ **“It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.”** ⁹ **It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes”**⁴—particularly if that prince happens to be Andrew Cuomo.

But David, in his Psalms, isn’t the only one to push back on Governor Cuomo’s remarks. Franklin Graham and his charitable organization, Samaritan’s Purse, has been **“worshipping”** in New York’s Central Park for weeks now. And what is the form of their worship? Well, it is worship performed on the exact same model of **justice** and **righteousness** that the Prophet Amos spoke of. For if justice is dispensing benefits to those in need and righteousness is a mark of faith in God, then Samaritan’s Purse has been worshipping continuously without end ever since the first of this month—because since then they have been on the frontlines in the fight against the coronavirus by operating a 68-bed emergency field hospital right there in the East Meadow of Central Park. And there, they are treating some of the most seriously ill COVID-19 patients. Dr. Elliott Tenpenny, the international health unit director of Samaritan’s Purse, explains their passion for caring for these desperately sick people this way: **“We want to be the light of Christ here. We want our patients to see Him in us, through our compassion and care.”**⁵ That attitude is indicative of true worship—the daily kind that offers **love and grace** to others and brings a smile to God’s face.

But, getting back to Prince Cuomo—excuse me, Governor Cuomo—What was it that Franklin Graham had to say about the Governor’s remarks? On Facebook Franklin Graham wrote: ***“We always must be careful what we take credit for. Yes, we must be cautious and combat the spread, but make no mistake—God can help us. His power is as infinite as His love. We continue to see answered prayer in our field hospital.”*** And then he set Cuomo straight by adding: ***“Gov. Cuomo, I urge you — don’t dismiss the power of prayer and the ability of God to work in this crisis and in the ones we will face in the future. He is our hope, and we continue to pray for His mercy on our nation.”***⁶

So, while this coronavirus may temporarily keep us from Church, don’t let it keep you from worshipping God. But remember—only a life dedicated to obeying God’s commands can bring acceptable worship to Him. The words of Amos remind us that God demands both ***justice*** in meeting the needs of others in our daily lives, and ***righteousness*** fueled by our faith in Him. These are the things that God wants you to bring to the table of worship, not merely ***“going-through-the-motions”*** with some form of empty rituals that are displayed on one day, but never lived out during the rest of the week.⁷ Rather, it is the worship we are called to engage in every day. The people of Israel did not understand this, and so they were condemned by Amos’ prophecy. Sadly, fewer and fewer in our society seem to understand this today. But you understand this. Why?—because you ***are*** God’s people. And so, you are called to live it out in your lives, and ***“Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”*** Go forth, and **LET IT ROLL!**

Amen.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
April 26, 2020
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
©2020 All Rights Reserved

¹ Jeff Mooney, “Righteousness”, Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, © 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers. Maps © 1998 by Holman Bible Publishers. Database © 2014 Wordsearch.

² Trent C. Butler, “Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah,” Holman Old Testament Commentary, © 2005 Broadman & Publishers. Database © 2013 WORDsearch.

³ Samuel Smith, “NY Gov. Cuomo on plateauing of COVID-19 cases: 'God did not do that',” <https://www.christianpost.com> (April 16, 2020).

⁴ Psalm 118:8-9 (NIV)

⁵ Franklin Graham, “Battleground: Central Park,” May 2020 Update Newsletter, Samaritan’s Purse International Relief.

⁶ Samuel Smith, "NY Gov. Cuomo on plateauing of COVID-19 cases: 'God did not do that'," <https://www.christianpost.com> (April 16, 2020).

⁷ Trent C. Butler, "Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah," Holman Old Testament Commentary, © 2005 Broadman & Holman Publishers. Database © 2013 WORDsearch.