



the heart of God

JUSTICE FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION

PART SEVEN

True Worship and Justice

AMOS 4-5





Part Seven – True Worship and Justice

By Pastor David Fields

Amos 4-5

“There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we have is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough...

Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you...Worship power and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is...they're unconscious. They are default settings.” – *David Foster Wallace*

I. All injustice flows from worshipping something other than the One, True, Living God.

All injustice on the horizontal level is a result of breaking the first of the ten commandments – the vertical level – where God says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” – *Exodus 20:3*

“Look deep enough underneath any horizontal human-against-human injustice and you will always find a vertical human-against-God injustice, a refusal to give the Creator the worship only the Creator is due. All injustice is a violation of the first commandment.”
– Thaddeus J. Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth: 12 Questions Christians Should Ask About Social Justice*

What’s the corrective? Start by giving God his due. True worship is to truly love the Living God.

Augustine, a church leader and theologian from North Africa, is so helpful on this point. In the fourth century he said it like this:
“Love God and do whatever you want.” – Augustine of Hippo, *Tractatus VII*

If my heart is guided, first and foremost by love for God, then my “affections” my “loves” will be tuned into what God wants. That will “recalibrate” all my other affections and wants. I’ll want to listen to what God says to me through his word and then do that.

“I won’t want to steal your stuff or your spouse because you carry the unique image of the God I love most. I won’t *want* to exploit you as a means to my own selfish ends, since you are made in the irreducibly valuable image of the God I love most. Love God, the Ultimate Other, and you will give those who bear your Beloved’s image the respect they are due.”
– *Thaddeus Williams*

Jesus – God’s own Son – came to the world to remake our hearts so that we will actually *want* what God wants; to want to love the God who made us for love

- Maybe some of you here today need to take this step; to say, “God, *You are my God*,” as we read in Psalm 63.
- For some of us, this simply means turning back to God. Like, we recognize that we have been loving something other than God as first and best. The brilliant reality of God’s grace is that he is running after us – he is longing for us to come home to this place of true love for him. The Jesus-Prayer teaches us to say: “Forgive us our trespasses – the ways we’ve stepped out of alignment with you and your ways – forgive us as we forgive others.”

– Matthew 6:12

II. True worship of the one True God requires True Justice.

Amos lived in the 8th Century, BC, and was a shepherd from Tekoa, an area just about 8 km from Bethlehem, and likely from the lower socioeconomic classes.

God called him to announce this message to those in the northern area of Israel – an area where the economy was booming, and people were getting rich – but largely on the backs of the poor.

“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, “Bring us some drinks!” – Amos 4:1

“Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. Burn leaven bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings – boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do,” declares the Sovereign Lord.” – Amos 4:4-5

Bashan is an area that borders Syria and Lebanon today, in the occupied region of Golan Heights, and it’s still an important agricultural area now as then, because this area collects rain, and streams pour out into the valleys, providing plenty of grass, where the “cows of Bashan” grow fat from the plenty.

Even though this is the 8th Century BC, the same pattern of injustice has plagued humanity generation after generation. This recalls the way the promise of wealth and comfort – the false-gods of wealth and comfort – can drive the real-life oppression of poor and needy.

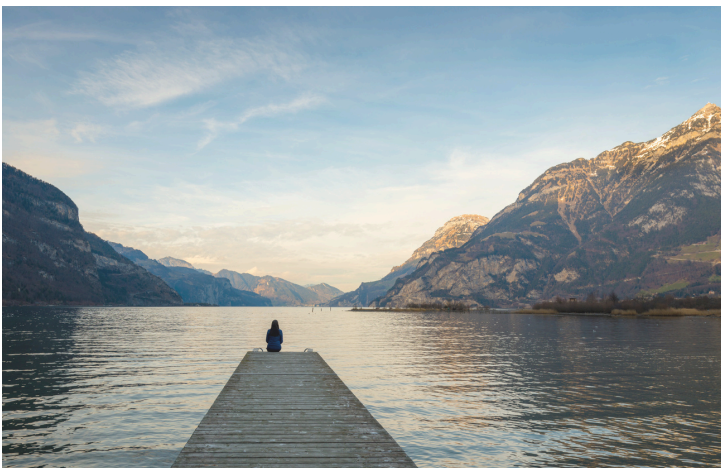
“I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring me choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

– Amos 5:21-24

God would rather they shut the doors of their religious gatherings, describing their worship as a stench in his nostrils.

But what does God accept as authentic worship? “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.”

In his most famous “I Have a Dream” speech, the Baptist Pastor, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. drew on the next chapter, Amos 5, to make his case for the equality of black Americans.



“We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote, and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” – *Martin Luther King Jr.*

There was a holy dissatisfaction with the status quo that kept African Americans segregated, unable to vote, unable to even rent a hotel room. And the justice that the civil rights activists – driven by the imperatives of these prophetic scriptures – enacted great change. So true worship, worship that seeks justice, truly honors God, and it changes things. Communities are different as a result.

A contemporary rendering of Amos 5

“I can’t stand your religious meetings.
 I’m fed up with your conferences and conventions.
 I want nothing to do with your religion projects,
 your pretentious slogans and goals.
 I’m sick of your fund-raising schemes,
 your public relations and image making.
 I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.
 When was the last time you sang to me?
 Do you know what I want?
 I want justice—oceans of it.
 I want fairness—rivers of it.
 That’s what I want.” – Amos 5:21-24, *The Message*

III. True Worship Changes Things

How do we rightly connect – or re-connect – worship and justice?

1. Worship can never be reduced to the private or merely “religious” sphere.

“Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.”
 – Romans 12:1, *The Message*

Paul defines what “true and proper worship” is all about (Rom 12:1 NIV).

“The measure of our worship isn’t about how we feel on Sunday morning, but about how we live on Monday morning and the rest of the week.” – *Mel Fehr*

2. What do our worship gatherings aim to produce? We see our gathered worship as:

a. A whole-life response to the grace of God in our lives

We come to join our hearts and voices to the holy roar of all creation, as we find in Revelation 5: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb (that is, Jesus) be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever! Amen” – *Revelation 5:13*

Our singing is an overflow of our love for God. It’s intended to help give language to our love. It’s intended to give hope to weary and worn-out hearts. It’s intended to *bless God’s heart*.

b. A rhythm of “remembrance”

Jesus calls us to “remember him” when we meet. And one of the ways we do that in by taking communion together regularly – and by preaching and singing that centres on the Good News of Jesus – his life, death, and resurrection – every single week.

“Remember who the God of love is! Remember who you are! Remember his grace! Remember the purpose he’s called you to! Remember!”



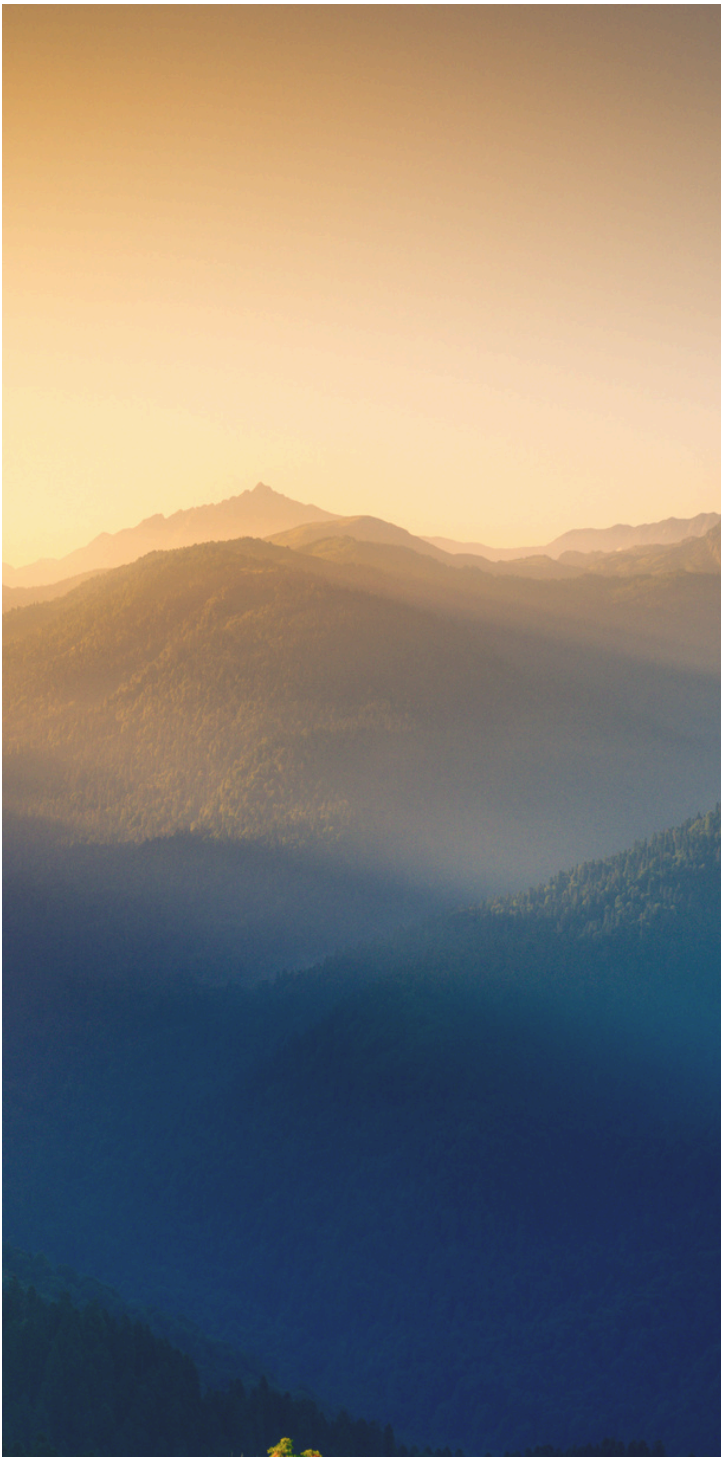
c. A mode of discipleship to Jesus

Again, what's the measure of our worship? How we live on Monday and throughout the week – like, in following the Way of Jesus.

- *Our gathered worship issues in a growing dissatisfaction with the status quo of the world – to have our hearts yearning for the kingdom of God. Ask: What am I doing with what God has put in my hands? My finances? My time? My energy? My talents and spiritual gifts?*
- *Our gathered worship issues in a measurable outpouring of generosity on behalf of the disadvantaged.*
- *Our gathered worship issues in a growing passion for a life of integrity in all our dealings. “Holiness is not being a snob.” – Rikki Watts*

Matthew 23:23: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of spice – mint, dill, cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the later [justice, mercy, faithfulness] without neglecting the former [tithing].”

“You’re looking into my heart, into my heart....I’ll bring you more than a song, I’ll bring you more than a song.”
– Matt Redman, *The Heart of Worship*





Open Up

In the message we looked at this idea: “The measure of our worship isn’t about how we feel on Sunday morning, but about how we live on Monday morning and the rest of the week.”

What do you think about that? In what ways does that challenge some of the common ways we might think about our worship gatherings? (i.e. a “consumer” type of mentality of “what am I getting out of this?”)

Dig In

1. Take a few minutes to look at how God was evaluating the worship practices of his people in **Isaiah 58:1-10**.

- a. What was the primary issue that God saw with the worship of his people?
- b. What was the solution?
- c. Where might the temptation to divide worship from justice creep into your own thinking or practice?

2. The New Testament church also wrestled with the connection between worship and justice.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

- a. What is Paul’s concern with how the Corinthians were practicing their worship gatherings?
- b. The issue with “eating in an unworthy manner” (1 Corinthians 11:27-32) is about how the church was not treating the people of the community with “equal concern” (see 1 1 Corinthians 12:25); the poor were being left out, and the rich were gorging themselves, drinking heavily, and maintaining the social distinctions of pagan Corinth. How might this same warning apply in church meetings today? (See also James 2:1-13)

3. I’ve heard many people say that the problem with Christianity is hypocrisy (which may very well be true in many ways). It turns out, Jesus is also not a fan. Take a moment to reflect on these words of Jesus to the Pharisees in **Matthew 23:23** “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of spice – mint, dill, cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the later [justice, mercy, faithfulness] without neglecting the former [tithing].”

- a. Notice: Jesus does not tell the Pharisees to discontinue the religious practice of tithing, but he points out how they neglected the more important matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. How do we ensure that our own worship practices are deeply connected to justice in the other six days?

Prayer

Take some time thank God for his graciousness toward us, particularly in those areas where we may have “neglected the matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness” in the social realm. Take time to ask that God would give us generous hearts that love and worship truly, as we aim to love our neighbours as ourselves.