

Worthless Worship

Amos 4:4-5, 5:21-27

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There are many shows on TV that include a court room scene. In fact, there are some that are wholeheartedly dedicated to court room drama. On these shows there is usually a defendant, a judge, a prosecuting attorney and a crowd of witnesses viewing the proceedings. That's precisely the scene that Amos paints for us as he continues to present his prophetic message to the people of Israel. In chapter three he invites the people of surrounding nations, especially Philistines and Egyptians, to have a seat on a hill side court room and witness the proceedings. The judge is the honorable Lord God Almighty. Amos is the prosecuting attorney, and Israel is the defendant. Beginning this Sunday and continuing for two more weeks, you are invited to join the guests who have been invited to this tribunal. Three serious charges are being brought against the ancient people of Israel. Each has to do with a serious violation of the commandments which they agreed to honor. Each is a serious infraction with regards to their relationship with God and their fellow citizens. Each has become so heinous that judgement must now be rendered. In addition to the evidence that Amos will present, additional testimony will be provided by the judge Himself as He speaks to those in the courtroom through visions given to the prosecuting attorney. Finally, after all of the accusations have been presented, the judge will hand down a decision based on the evidence.

But before the proceedings begin there is some background information that needs to be shared. As is well known in the pages of the Bible, the people of Israel can trace their heritage as a nation to that solemn meeting with God at the foot of Mount Sinai. After being freed from slavery, they were led to this mountain by Moses, the servant of the Lord. It had been a difficult journey, the people often complaining about the privations they suffered along the way. Furthermore, they had built a golden calf and worshipped this image when Moses climbed the mountain to meet with God. Only his intercession saved them from destruction. Thoroughly chastened, they had at last entered into a solemn agreement with God, vowing to be His people and obey His commandments. Now, hundreds of years later, it appears that they no longer consider themselves to be a people precious unto the Lord, nor do they consider His commandments and guidance to be the hallmarks

by which they live. The accusations presented by Amos will clearly delineate their total disregard for a relationship which they once considered to be sacred.

So now let the trial begin as we examine the first accusation. Previously presented this morning during the Scripture reading, it can be summed up by two words—"WORTHLESS WORSHIP." Rejected and found to be completely unacceptable, it has been declared by God to be worthless for three reasons. First, it is insincere. Outward demonstrations of devotion can never mask the lack of inner conviction. The people come to this temple in Bethel with lavish gifts and sacrifices, but it is all for show. They have no desire to serve or honor the Lord. Their gifts do not reflect a genuine relationship with the sovereign Lord of the universe. If anything, their sacrificial offerings are to impress their fellow worshippers. Likewise, their music reflects nothing more than their desire to hear themselves sing and play their musical instruments. It's all a show of praise for themselves. It has nothing to do with the God whom they profess to worship. As another of God's prophets speaking of God's behalf said, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13).

Second their worthless worship is ineffectual. It doesn't change the way they live. They come to the temple and repeat lots of words about repentance and right living and then go home and live the same old way they have been living in the past. Their worship does not change their actions or their attitudes. Their treatment of those living around them is just as self-centered and demeaning as it was before. As previously stated, the Lord wants their lives to reflect a desire for justice that will roll along like a mighty river and righteousness that will be like a never-ending stream of kindness and goodness. Unfortunately, that has not happened. Worship that has no impact on the way we live is truly worthless.

Finally and most importantly of all, their worship is idolatrous. They are not worshipping the Lord. They are worshipping false deities. Like their ancestors they are worshipping the golden calves of this world. They say they are honoring the Lord, but where within the sacred writings does it describe God as a deity riding on a golden bull like the one that now stands outside the temple in Bethel? It is a return to those awful days in the wilderness. When Moses climbed the mountain to meet with God and did not return as soon as was expected, what did the people do? They demanded that Aaron make them new gods whom they could worship. In response he fashioned a golden calf out of the gold the people brought to

him and declared, "These are your new gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). Now that ancient idolatrous practice has been reinvented in Bethel along with the worship of other deities like the star god Kaiwan.

Your honor, the Lord God of all creation, I now submit this first accusation against Israel for your review and judgement, recommending that those who have been involved in these acts of worthless worship be removed from Your presence, exiled to a foreign land beyond the neighboring country of Syria, whose capital is Damascus. I await Your decision and will now begin gathering my evidence for the second charge that I am preparing to present to this court. Furthermore, I advise those sitting on the hillsides of Bethel, both those of this present age and of the ages to come, to pay close attention to what has been presented, lest they too become guilty of the same offences which have now been brought to your attention.

So let's do what Amos recommends. Let's see if there is the possibility that God's people in this day and time can also be guilty of worthless worship. Is it possible that at times our worship is also worthless? Remember what Jesus said about the Pharisee who tried to impress his friends with a self-congratulatory prayer? Did God hear that prayer? No, He did not. But when the tax collector humbled himself and earnestly prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," God answered that prayer and the man went home forgiven (Luke 18:9-14). Are we sometimes guilty of praying prayers and reciting responses that don't come from our hearts, just mouthing the words without any real understanding as to what they mean or without appreciating how they should be applied to our own lives? It's all too easy to just go through the motions when we worship—singing, praying and reciting that which has become a mere formality. To be honest, do we not find ourselves sometimes guilty of insincerity when we gather together for worship?

Additionally, is our worship ineffectual? We come to church week after week, hearing sermons that encourage us to make meaningful changes in the way we live. But once we leave, is the message and its implications for our personal conduct quickly forgotten? Do we dismiss the need to confess sins, offer apologies, right wrongs, or change attitudes and convictions? Are we not sometimes like the farmer who showed up for church on a cold, snowy Sunday morning? Only he and the preacher were present. The minister was about to offer a prayer and head back home. But the farmer objected saying that if he only had one cow in the barn, he would still feel obligated to feed it. Knowing that there were a number of things in the

farmer's life that needed to be corrected, the minister preached a powerful sermon with the farmer clearly in mind. After he was finished he asked his single attendee what he thought of the message. The farmer replied, "Preacher, you sure would have told them if they'd been here."

Finally, what about idolatry? There are no golden calves standing in front of any of our churches. We don't worship foreign deities. Aren't all of the symbols we place in our sanctuaries representative of the Christian faith, like a cross for example? Nevertheless, foreign deities can still slip into our midst in other ways, invisible and yet very real and present. They come in the form of beliefs and practices that are not found in God's Word. For example, the Canaanite god Baal, a god that found its way into Israel's worship practices, was a weather deity, but he was also a god associated with fertility, including immorality. When Christian churches adopt standards of behavior that would be right at home with the gods of the Canaanites, have not those congregations bent their knees in reverence to a god other than the One revealed in the Bible? From its earliest days, the Christian church had to protect itself from such an outcome. The rampant sexual immorality of the religions of the Greek and Roman world could not be allowed to take root and find acceptance in the lives of God's people as evidenced, for example, in chapters five and six in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

To sum it all up, Amos told the people of Israel that they were guilty of worthless worship. Had you been a member of a jury hearing his testimony, would you have agreed with Amos? Would you have determined that he was right, that the ancient Israelites were indeed guilty of worthless worship. How about today? Is it not imperative that we too must be careful not to follow in their footsteps, lest our worship also meet a similar fate, rejected because God loves us too much to accept such unworthy praise.