

Core Values #3: WORSHIP & JUSTICE

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 1

Modesto CRC

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Love for God and People

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We've been talking about the core values that God expects his church to have – values that guide everything we are and do. The first was UNITY – unity in Christ not in being the same, and last week we talked about LOVE OF ANOTHER KIND. Our third core value flows from the love we talked about last week.

In order to feel the impact of this core value lets go on a journey through the scripture together. This may feel like a little different approach than we are used to, and will take some concentration, but I think you will see a little of God's heart. The first chapter of Isaiah, which we read, is like a preamble to the book. In this short chapter Isaiah painted the problem God had with Israel. In a way it is a confusing preamble – interspersing worship with social justice. What's the bottom line, we might ask? Right worship or just behavior?

Isaiah began by grieving Israel's rebellion against God:

(vs. 3) The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand (4) They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their back on him."

In verses 11 and following God declares their worship empty and meaningless: "The multitude of your sacrifices – what are they to me? says the Lord. I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats...."

Verse 13 feels shocking: **"Stop bringing meaningless offerings! I cannot bear your evil assemblies."** Did God change his mind about how he wanted them to worship? Did they get the liturgy wrong? Why is God rejecting their worship and sacrifices? Was it because of the idolatry or some other gross sin? The answer is in

verses 16 & 17:

"Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless., plead the case of the widow."

In verse 23 God justifies his punishment of Israel this way: **"Their rulers do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them."**

The prophet seems to have worship of God and social justice all mixed up. What do the poor have to do with what we are doing right now – as we worship God and treasure our relationship with him in music, prayer and scripture reading? ***For the***

prophet the test of right worship seems to have been the way the least among them were treated. (repeat) Again, in Isaiah 2 the prophet describes all the religious ways in which they have rejected God – idols, Eastern superstitions, divination – you talk about wrong worship! Yet, when God brought judgment, his verdict never

“What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?”

God again justified his judgment for unfaithful worship on the basis of a lack of justice and impact on the poor.

There are so many examples. In chapter 58:6-7 Isaiah talked about fasting as a way of drawing close to God, about worship:

“Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked to cloth him, and not turn away from your flesh and blood.”

Other prophets echo this theme: Ezekiel 18 and 22, Jeremiah 34, and Amos 2:6 says:

“For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed”

I knew there were hundreds of passages in the Bible that address God’s expectation for his people to be concerned about the poor. What I did not see was the relationship to worship. Were the prophets confused, or might we be the ones who fail to get it? If you want to see the heart of God for the poor, read Psalm 82.

The prophet Micah asked (6:6-8): **“With what shall I come before the Lord and bow before the exalted God?”** HOW SHALL WE WORSHIP? What does God want in worship? Micah suggests burnt offerings, thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? My firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? We might add, does our worship first of all involve right liturgy, the right music, the right place, the right people? What does God want first from us in worship? Again the prophet is clear: worship and caring for others by seeking justice are inseparable:

“He has told you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Why would God do that – not accept our worship unless we seek justice and care for the poor and oppressed? Those people are not going to fill the pews. Those people are not going to help us with the budget? Those people might receive our help and not even believe. People sometimes want to explain it all away. How often have you heard comments like, “well, if they worked hard like I did they would be OK.” In addition to the failure to see real differences in opportunities and the devastation of generational poverty, such statements are away of avoiding God’s expectation for us. Unfortunately we tend to judge what we do not understand. Do you remember last week we talked about how God has called us to imitate his love of another kind? How did that go – *agape*’ is love by the decision of the lover, not in how loveable the loved one is, and *karis* is love that is a gift. We want to make everything about us, and we want to measure our success in conversions and church memberships. The prophets are clear. If it is all about us, God will not receive our worship, and he will turn away as surely as he hated Israel’s sacrifices. Humble worship and seeking justice (raising people up) - from God’s perspective they are one thing. He gives us the power to be faithful, not to save people. Only the Holy Spirit can do that.

Jesus was asked what we have to do to inherit eternal life. We usually hear two commands, but we are wrong. It is one command: love God and love your neighbor. They cannot be separated. We cannot do one without the other.

This has been one of those weeks for me when I kept studying, feeling like light bulbs were going off. I knew all of this, but I never saw it come together like this. As I kept looking it occurred to me that in the Old Testament the two words show up together all the time: RIGHTEOUSNESS (being right with God, being connected in Jesus Christ, being God’s person, having the attitude of worship) and JUSTICE (making wrongs right, social justice is about the distribution of power and wealth, caring for the poor). Righteousness and justice are together throughout the Psalms and in the prophets. For example, Psalm 33:5 says, ***“The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.”*** Then I noticed that they never show up together in the New Testament. That got me searching. Why? The reason is that the Greek only has one

word for these two concepts. Righteousness and justice are one. God's righteousness includes both. For example in Matthew 6:33: *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness..."* Our relationship with God in Christ – his righteousness cannot be separated from justice and making wrongs right for people who cannot speak for themselves or do not have power because they don't vote.

Once we've heard the prophets, we see it all over. When Jesus talked about judgment in Matthew 25, what was the basis for his separation of the sheep from the goats? Was it how they worshiped? Their worship style? Their theology? The right rules? Against the right things? The church they belonged to? The extended family they were a part of?

Matt 25:31-40

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

At the end of the day, how we treat the poor and the oppressed is the measure of who we truly worship. It determines if God will receive our worship, even if it is worship at all. That is what the Bible says.

We began by saying that we are talking about core values. Biblical core values are how we judge our faithfulness as Christian and as a church. We know that often what we make most important reveals values that are not consistent with God's idea of core values. Let's think about this together.

In my mind it seems clear that what we do together in worship is one of our greatest strengths. At the same time we need to ask ourselves, why does God have us here? Why is this church in Modesto? Why are we here on College Ave? Is it just because this is a comfortable place to worship? Maybe this is a critical point in our history. We all know that our community has huge needs. Modesto is one of the worst cities in which to be poor. We have huge numbers of children at risk. There are so many families that need help in order to just function as families. There are many agencies we could partner with in this care for the poor and seeking justice for the oppressed. I am so grateful that our leaders, especially our deacons are really starting to ask these kinds of questions.

There was a time when being a Christian Reformed Church meant that we were a gathering of extended Dutch families that had enough children to keep the church growing, and the children stayed where they grew up, so ministry was about our little community and about raising money to send off somewhere else. None of that is any longer true. Slowly we come to realize that God has us here for a reason – not just our money but our personal investment in our community, in our city, in our neighbors. In the last year we have been trying to understand what we need to look like as a truly spiritually vibrant and healthy church. Part of that is a Christ-centered pulpit. Part of it is strong leadership that is dedicated to and in love with the Lord. Part of it is having vital programs that educate, encourage, and help all our people grow. And a big part is ministry that we do together. Frankly, I have been surprised by how many people here get that. These are people working in some phase of Family Promise, people who have been serving at Redwood in so many ways in addition to giving money, people who have been helping Interfaith Ministries distribute food, and people at Modesto Gospel Mission, Sierra Salem and some others. It is wonderful to see, including generous offerings for people in need.

If we accept the Bible at its word this morning, if the prophet is right, God accepts the worship of people who love mercy, seek justice, and walk humbly with their God. I recently ran into some research that followed teenagers who were in the church in Junior High until they were in their 20s. The church across the country has been losing

nearly 80% of their teenagers by the time they are in their 20s except for one group – teens who were involved with ministry, with mission trips, with serving in the community, with caring for the poor. Young people who experienced ministry stayed. I've seen this in families here. They came to know the power of Jesus' statement, **'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'** This is the challenge to every one of us.

Core values. We've heard God call us to UNITY. We've seen LOVE OF ANOTHER KIND. Worship is so central to everything we are. Our core value has to be that place where worship and justice come together so that our relationship with God on Sunday morning spreads into every area of our ministry. How did the Psalmist say it in Psalm 33: **"The Lord loves righteousness and justice, the earth is full of his unfailing love."** As we think about the core values God gives we are challenged as individuals, as families, and as a church community. Is he enjoying our worship? Unity, love of another kind, and the embrace of worship and justice are God's core values for his church. Are they ours? Will you pray with me.