

WHY DOES GOD HATE RELIGION?

AMOS 5:18-24

Hypocrisy can get you into lots of trouble. A police officer pulled a driver aside and asked for his license and registration. "What's wrong, officer," the driver asked. "I didn't go through any red lights, and I certainly wasn't speeding." "No, you weren't," said the officer, "but I saw you waving your fist as you swerved around the lady driving in the left lane, and I further observed your flushed and angry face as you shouted at the driver of the Hummer who cut you off, and how you pounded your steering wheel when the traffic came to a stop near the bridge." "Is that a crime, officer?" "No, but when I saw the 'Jesus loves you and so do I' bumper sticker on your car, I figured the car had to be stolen." Ouch!

The people of God during the time when the prophet, Amos, was ministering had a serious disconnect between their religious practices and the sincerity of their hearts towards God. Outwardly, they were very religious. They considered their material prosperity to be evidence of God's blessing upon their lives. They gathered for worship regularly. They had religious feasts and festivals at the right times. They listened to sermons and sang songs of praise. But God was anything but pleased with all their religiosity. Ironically, all this religion nauseated and sickened God of all things. Why?

We're in the midst of a message series I'm calling "Faith In A Minor Key." We're considering several Bible passages in a section of the Old Testament sometimes called the Minor Prophets simply because they're shorter in length than the Major Prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah. Now Amos' ministry was at the same time as Hosea whose prophecy we considered the last two Sundays. This was about 750 years before Jesus' birth when the nation of Israel had divided into two separate countries: Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Like Hosea, Amos spoke to the people in the northern kingdom of Israel. They addressed the same people and the same issues but with different approaches. You might recall that in Hosea God is depicted as a kind of injured husband calling Israel, who had been acting like an unfaithful wife, back into a relationship with Him. In Amos God is depicted in a much more "in your face" and "get your act together or else" way. Both are accurate portrayals of God's character and both enrich our understanding of who God is and what it means to have a relationship with Him.

I want to read a key passage in Amos just now (Amos 5:18-24). Those verses touch on many of the themes found throughout the book of Amos. Furthermore, it's here where Amos answers the question, "Why does God hate religion?" I find at least three answers to that question. Here's the first one:

RELIGION CAN DESTROY THE REALITY OF YOUR COMMITMENT.

I'm using that word "religion" in a negative way. Sure, I'm aware that it can be used to refer to a real, living and sincere faith in Jesus. But this morning I want you to think of that word "religion" as describing a kind of spiritual hypocrisy:

participating in religious events or practices but not really having a transformed life. You've probably heard that saying or seen that bumper sticker that says, "Christianity is a relationship not a religion." Depending on how you define the word "religion", there's a lot of truth in that observation.

For most people today, religion is a very good thing. The word used more often today is "spirituality." Fewer people today say, "I'm a religious person." That has some frumpy connotations to it. Now more people say, "I'm a spiritual person." What they mean by that is up for grabs! It can mean everything from reading the Bible to practicing yoga or everything from going to church to thinking pleasant thoughts about God out in one of the Metro Parks. When you look across our world, you see a wide variety of religions, belief systems and religious practices. Many conclude that this is a positive, beneficial and wholesome reality. They conclude that any kind of religion or expression of spirituality is better than none. Many conclude that God – if there is a God – is basically pleased with all these religious practices and spirituality. This is because they assume that all religions are basically the same. People will say or think things like this: "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something. It doesn't matter what you worship as long as you worship something. If what you believe makes you feel good and meets a need in your life, then it's good. If your religion helps people with their problems, it's good."

But that's not how God thinks. God isn't impressed with every religious ritual or every kind of personal spirituality. There are times when God just flat out hates stuff that looks pretty religious or spiritual to us. He says here: "I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps." (Amos 5:21-23 NLT) Does that mean that everything that smacks of a religious ritual displeases God? Of course not! The Bible is full of instructions on how to worship God and live out your relationship with Him. But God hates religion that's merely empty ritual. God hates spirituality that's merely a reflection of what you might want to believe about God rather than what God Himself proclaims to be truth. At the end of the day, what pleases God is a genuine, thankful and obedient response to Him that grows out of a life that has been - and is still being - transformed by Him.

Consider what was happening in Amos' day. This was an economically prosperous and fairly stable time in Israel. The people looked religious enough. But when Amos looked at the morality of the people, he knew God was not pleased. Some people were getting rich by taking advantage of the poor. Small farmers were losing their land to large estate holders. Government officials and judges were taking bribes. Justice in the courts had become a travesty. Sin is sin to God. Don't limit sin to things like lying, stealing or murder. It's just as much a sin to take advantage of someone in a business deal. It's a sin to deprive a man of his livelihood. It's a sin to deny a person justice. This

was what was happening in Israel. And the very ones perpetrating or condoning these injustices were still attending “church”, so to speak, all the while thanking and praising God for His blessings. The people observed the festivals, celebrated the feasts, presented the proper offerings and sang the right songs. But it all made God want to throw up! God hates religion for religion’s sake. Their religion was a performance. Their spirituality had no genuine allegiance to God. It was a sham, a lie, hypocrisy through and through.

What does this tell you about God? If your relationship with God doesn’t mean the ongoing transformation of your life, then all you have left is so much religion or spirituality. If your relationship with God consists of attending church on Sunday morning, singing songs, listening to sermons, even having a quiet time, going to Bible studies and tithing, but it has no relevance to how you do your work on Monday morning, how you treat other people on Tuesday afternoon, how you interact with your family on Wednesday night or the formation of your character all day on Thursday, then all you have is religion or spirituality. You can observe Christianity in an outward sort of way, but then allow your heart to get cold and hard towards God and the things of God. May God never say of you what He said of the people of God in the Old Testament through another prophet, Isaiah, “...‘These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.’” (Is 29:13 NLT) It’s easy to think that doing religious stuff either keeps you or makes you right with God rather than simple obedience to God’s will each and every day. Let’s face it: we can keep on doing all sorts of “churchy” things while tolerating known sin in our lives day after day. We can excuse and explain it away to our own satisfaction. Our lips can praise God while our hearts and the way we live our everyday lives deny Him.

Be careful, however, that you don’t read more into what Amos is saying than he intends! Someone will say, “I already know all that! It just goes to show that going to church and doing all that churchy stuff isn’t important. As long as you just try to live a good life and treat people well, that’s all that matters.” That’s not what God was saying through Amos! I have yet to meet a genuine follower of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit’s fire and joy, being used powerfully in the lives of others who doesn’t do those so-called “churchy” things. Amos is simply warning you not to let the daily and weekly practice of your faith replace the reality of your commitment to Jesus Christ. Love and serve God from the heart. Make sure your commitment is just as much internal as it is external. And above all, make sure there is an ongoing transformation occurring in your life so that you are actually becoming more like the Jesus you say you follow. God hates religion because it can destroy the reality of your commitment. Secondly:

RELIGION CAN DISTORT THE PRACTICE OF YOUR FAITH.

How can that happen? Consider what was happening in Amos’ day. The people of Israel – at least many of the rich ones who were taking advantage of others –

saw no connection between the proper worship of God and how they treated their neighbors. On Saturday – which was their day of worship – they gathered to worship, to sing, to praise and to pray to God. In addition, Old Testament worship had several annual festivals and feasts that sometimes went on for several days. But as soon as the Sabbath was over or the festival concluded, these folk would be out the very next day seeing him if they could swindle a poor man out of his land or bribe a judge to get a favorable verdict. Religion had distorted the practice of their faith. To their way of thinking, just going through all the appropriate religious rituals made everything else they did acceptable. They thought they could just pay lip service to God thinking He would overlook how unbearable they made life for others around them.

God reacts very strongly here against this kind of religion or spirituality, doesn't He? What was God after? What did God want from them? What do you learn here about what God considers authentic spirituality? "Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps." (Amos 5:23 NLT) Interesting! When you aren't living right before the Lord, even the most beautiful music offered up in God's Name is just so much unbearable noise in His ears. What did God want? "Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living." (Amos 5:24 NLT) God wanted His people to treat others with fairness, compassion and love. When He saw that happening in their lives, then – and only then - would He be pleased with their worship practices.

There are many ways to apply what God said through Amos to you and me today. Anytime you start to separate certain religious rituals from how you live out your faith in God on a daily basis you will get a distorted perspective of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. When being a Christian gets divorced from everyday life, you're in big trouble spiritually. You can be tempted to separate what you believe about God from how you act in everyday life and how you treat other people. When that happens, you end up with a distorted faith.

A while ago I read about a South American Christian named Bernardo Arandia who decided to stop growing coca – the plant from which cocaine is made – because he realized it was inconsistent with his faith in Jesus. At the time he had five kids to support on a small farm. His pastor preached a sermon about the evil products made from coca. Arandia said, "The pastor told us about all the people in America who have died because of coca. He told us we must know the truth about cocaine. It is a destroyer, like Satan. He told us that as Christian farmers, we must produce crops that give life not take it away. I decided that day to burn my coca, and I would never grow coca again." But it was a hard decision. He continued, "I hear about all these families with sacks of dollars piling up in their homes, and I see that my children are more hungry now than they've ever been. Sometimes, coca tempts me to grow again, because I see people who grow it turning rich overnight. But I know, as a Christian, that I cannot do it anymore. And I know God will somehow bless me for doing the right thing." Now, that's real faith! Do you have the same attitude when you could make a

buck dishonestly? Will you have the same response when you could succeed by taking advantage of someone else? Do you think that because you do religious stuff like coming to church that God will just overlook a sinful compromise? Don't let religion distort the practice of your faith!

Here we see God's great heart of love for the poor and oppressed in this world. Sure, there are lazy poor people. Sure, there are people who take advantage of government programs. But there are hard working poor people, too. And there are poor people who become victims of oppression. They get their faces shoved in the dirt figuratively speaking. Others have made life unbearable for them. I think of the millions of children in third world countries who go to bed hungry every night, who have no access to medical care and who have no opportunity to be educated. What have they ever done to deserve their lot in life? It's in Amos and the other prophets that we most clearly see God's great heart for the poor and the oppressed. It's here that we learn that to take advantage of the poor is to set yourself against God. It's here that we see that to seek justice and pursue right dealings with others pleases God immensely.

This stuff matters to God! The Bible says, "Give justice to the poor and the orphan; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute. Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people." (Ps 82:3-4 NLT) Don't try to separate worshipping God from the proper treatment of people. The Bible says, "The LORD is more pleased when we do what is right and just than when we offer him sacrifices." (Prov 21:3 NLT) I think it's sin when conservative, evangelicals – and I consider myself one – make comments that reveal a bias or a contempt for the poor. I think it's wrong when it's suggested that we shouldn't waste time, money or energy seeking justice for people as if God has no interest in their every day life and situations. That's not biblical. Do you hear the heart of God in what Amos prophesied? God says, "... I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living." (Amos 5:24 NLT) Don't let religion distort the practice of your faith. God hates religion and here's a third reason:

RELIGION CAN DENY THE FACT OF JUDGMENT.

That sounds contradictory, doesn't it? Sometimes it seems like really religious people are always talking about judgment. But I want you to notice again what Amos says in 5:18-20 (NLT): "What sorrow awaits you who say, 'If only the day of the LORD were here!' You have no idea what you are wishing for. That day will bring darkness, not light. In that day you will be like a man who runs from a lion— only to meet a bear. Escaping from the bear, he leans his hand against a wall in his house—and he's bitten by a snake. Yes, the day of the LORD will be dark and hopeless, without a ray of joy or hope."

Here we find a key phrase in the Old Testament – "the day of the Lord." What's that about? It's not a 24 hour block of time. Instead, it refers to a period of time when God enters into a human situation in order to save or to judge or both. It

usually refers to some kind of supernatural intervention. When the people of Israel crossed through the Red Sea on dry land and Egypt's pursuing army was destroyed by the hand of God that was a "day of the Lord." When the walls of Jericho fell it was another "day of the Lord." The people of Israel during Amos' ministry liked to talk a lot about "the day of the Lord" because they thought it meant when God would destroy all of Israel's enemies and the nation would receive great blessings from the Lord.

What was Amos' response? "Don't be so sure! Be careful what you ask for! God is going to judge everyone who rebels against him. Your corruption, your idolatry and your treatment of the poor has made you an object of His judgment. Don't trust in your church services! Do you really think just because you engage in religious rituals or practice some kind of personal spirituality that you will be spared God's anger? When God decides to judge there is no escape. It's like a man trying to escape a lion only to come face to face with a bear. He gets away from the bear only to be bitten by a snake which somehow got into his house. God's judgment is relentless, inescapable and unavoidable." Sadly, we know from the Bible and from history that the "day of the Lord" did in fact come for Israel. In 722 BC – some 30 years after Amos spoke these words – the mighty Assyrian army crushed Israel and took the people into captivity.

You should be sobered when you understand this passage. Why? The people of God in Amos' day thought that if they just performed religiously, God would never send judgment on them. On others – yes, thank God – but not them. As long as they did the "churchy" stuff or thought sweet, gentle thoughts about God's love, God couldn't help but be impressed by their religion or spirituality. Somehow their religion had denied the fact of judgment. Here's something that shakes me to the core of my being. There will be people who have gone to church all their lives, people who have heard the Gospel preached countless times, people who did all the "churchy" stuff, but people who – when that great and final "day of the Lord" dawns – will find it to be a day of terror and darkness rather than joy and light. Their faith was a set of beliefs only, not something that changed how they lived. They had religion, but they never had Jesus. They were spiritual, but they were never indwelt or filled with the Holy Spirit.

Back in July 1976, Israeli commandos made a daring raid at an airport in Entebbe, Uganda in which 103 Jewish hostages were freed. In less than fifteen minutes, the soldiers had killed all seven kidnapers and set the captives free. As successful as the rescue was, however, three of the hostages were killed during the raid. As the commandos entered the terminal, they shouted in Hebrew, "Get down! Crawl!" The Jewish hostages all understood Hebrew so they immediately got down on the ground. The terrorists didn't speak Hebrew so they were left standing. The rescuers shot everyone standing up. Unfortunately, two of the hostages hesitated – perhaps to see what was happening – and were also cut down. One young man was already lying down and for some unknown reason he actually stood up when the commandos entered the terminal. He, too, was shot

and killed with the bullets meant for the enemy. Had those three obeyed the soldiers' command, they would have been freed with the other 100 hostages.

There is yet coming the single greatest Day of the Lord when all of God's enemies will be judged forever and all those who belong to Him will be saved forever. You can only escape that coming Day of the Lord when you are rightly related to another Day of the Lord that occurred nearly 2000 years ago – the day Jesus died on a cross for your sins and mine. He paid the penalty for your sin in exchange for your eternal commitment to Him. When you put your trust in Jesus and what He did for you on that past Day, it forever changes how God will treat you on that future Day of the Lord. So what's the evidence that you have truly put your faith in Jesus? A changed life – a transformed life. Religion will not save you. Spirituality will not save you. God offers salvation to everyone but you must obey Jesus' command to put your trust in Jesus, repent of your sin, make Him the Lord of your life and allow the Holy Spirit to transform you your whole life long. Otherwise – like those three hostages in Entebbe, Uganda who didn't listen and obey - you will perish in the judgment God intends for the devil and all who prefer to obey him.