

**How Can we Make our Worship
Pleasing to God? ~ Amos 5:18-27**

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Many years ago when I was a kid, I remember deliveries at our home from the milk man. A guy would drive around in a truck full of glass bottles filled with milk. My Mom would leave a note on our door about how many milk bottles we wanted on our delivery day. Sometimes we need 2. Sometimes 1 and sometimes none. You put a 'No Milk' sign in your window if you didn't want any. You could also leave your empty milk bottles on your steps, and the milk man would pick them up and take them to the milk distribution plant. You would also leave your money for the milk on the steps or in a little envelope and the milkman would collect it. Sometimes people would leave messages for the milkman.

A long time milk man in England collected some of the more memorable notes or messages he received over the years. Some were clear & some were interesting. Here's 6 examples of interesting milk notes:

- Dear Milkman, I've just had a baby. Please leave another one."
- Sorry not to have paid your bill before. My wife had a baby and I've been carrying it around in my pocket for weeks.
- Please send me a form for cheap milk. I have a baby two months old and did not know about it until a neighbor told me.
- From now on, please leave 2 pints every other day and on the days in between, except Wednesdays and Saturdays when I don't want any milk.
- Please leave no milk today. When I say today, I mean tomorrow for I wrote this note yesterday.
- No milk today. Please don't leave milk at number 14 either as he is dead until further notice.

Can you imagine trying to decipher all those messages? It must have been an exercise in communication clarification for that milkman. But miscommunication or blocked communication happens not only between milk people and their customers. Husbands and wives experience miscommunications. Children and parents often experience communication blockages or breakdowns. And we can experience broken or blocked communication with God. This can happen while we worship God. We come to a worship gathering like this one. We join in with others in worshipping God & singing to Him. We assume God receives and accepts our worship. So we think communication has happened.

But is it possible that God refuses to accept our worship? Might there be a situation where God will not listen to our worship or our prayers? If that's possible, what might cause this blockage? What's our part in unblocking it?

That's what we will explore today as we continue our study of worship from the Minor Prophet Amos. He was sent by God from the southern part of ancient Israel called Judah to the northern kingdom called Israel. God sent Amos to warn the Israelites about their overly relaxed living concerning His priorities. Instead of worshipping Him at God's designated place, the temple in Jerusalem, they set up their own worship centers in the north. They did a lot of worshipping there. But they worshipped a god of their own making. They weren't really worshipping the one true God. So God sends Amos to let them know about this. Otherwise they would likely continue in this practice thinking their worship was accepted by God.

Amos tells a different story. He has already exposed their self-centered worship practices. The last time we were in Amos, we saw him call them to "Seek God & live." They were pursuing a life and worship that would end in death. They would not receive the life God had for them the way they were living. Now Amos comes with another message to challenge their belief that God automatically accepted their worship. We will look at three questions today – Does God accept all our worship? If He doesn't, what must we do to ensure God accepts our worship? What are some ways this can show up in our lives? I pray God will use our together time to unblock anything between Him & us and strengthen our communication with Him through worship.

Amos 5:18-27 (ESV)

¹⁸ Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!

Why would you have the day of the LORD?

It is darkness, and not light,

¹⁹ as if a man fled from a lion,

and a bear met him,

or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,

and a serpent bit him.

²⁰ Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light,

and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹ "I hate, I despise your feasts,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,

I will not look upon them.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;

to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

²⁵ “Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? ²⁶ You shall take up Sikkuth your king, and Kiyyun your star-god—your images that you made for yourselves,²⁷ and I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,” says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.

Amos begins by declaring “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord?” Or, “why would you want the Day of the Lord to come?” Apparently, there were some in Israel who looked forward to something called the day of the Lord. Amos is the first prophet to mention this day. He prophesies around 750BC before Isaiah & Jeremiah. We know the Day of the Lord as the Day of Judgment, a day of dread for those who don’t know God. But it seems the Israelites looked forward to it as a day of victory. They seemed to assume that God would intervene in some way historically and reestablish Israel as a prominent Middle Eastern power. Since they were ethnic descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the forefathers of the nation, they would automatically be blessed on the day of the Lord.

But Amos announces that this day will be very different than they expect. “It is darkness, and not light.” Instead of bringing hope and blessing, they would experience hopelessness and a curse because of their disobedience to God. “It will be as if a man fled from a lion and a bear met him or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.”

So Amos gives a picture of what the day of the Lord will be like for these unfaithful Israelites. It will be as if they were out in the wild one day and came across a lion. The lion chased them with an intention to kill. They somehow escape. Maybe they hide behind a stand of trees and the lion passes by. But just when they think they’re safe, they discover they have actually stumbled onto the edge of a bear’s den. It’s a mother bear with cubs. She feels threatened or at least she thinks they’re threatening her cubs. So she attacks. So they would be on the run again. Somehow they would make it safely back to their houses. In relief they would lean against a wall. But waiting in some little cut out of the wall is a serpent. It uncoils and bites the hand that they put against the wall. There would be no escape.

And there would be no escape from God on the day of the Lord for those who do not fear Him. Amos emphasizes this by stating “the day of the Lord will be darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it.” So there is clearly something wrong with these people’s understanding of the day of the Lord and of the state of their relationship with God.

Then we get to verse 21. Notice the speaker changes. It is no longer Amos speaking but the Lord himself. We don't find this out until verse 27 where the speaker is announced – "Says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts." So what does the Lord say?

"I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." These feasts and assemblies were the religious festivals. They likely refer to the three times a year celebrations that God ordained for His people to participate in. The people assumed that God would be pleased with these feasts. But what does He say. "I hate, I despise your feasts." That's not mild language. That's not saying "He's slightly disappointed or a little offended." This is outright hatred and despising. These are very strong emotions.

Verse 22 – "Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them." The burnt offering was designed to express total homage or worship towards God and serve as a symbol of atonement for sin. It was a costly sacrifice to offer. Yet the Lord will not accept it. The grain or cereal offering paid tribute to the Lord by returning to Him a part of his creation on which they depended. So it's like our offering during our worship services. We give back to the Lord what He has given to us to demonstrate our faith in His provision and to recognize it's all from Him. But the Lord would not accept the grain offerings from this people.

End of verse 22 – "And the peace offerings of your fattened animals. I will not look on them." A peace offering was basically a make peace offering with God. You burnt part of it on the altar; you shared part of it with the priests and you ate part of it with your family and friends. This symbolized peace in your relationship to God and communion with one another. But the Lord will not even look at it.

Then in verse 23, He does not want to hear the songs or music of their worship. They came to sing celebration songs about the Lord. They played skillfully their harps before him. Yet He would not listen to it.

The Lord completely rejects every aspect of their worship. He hates; he despises; he will not accept, he will not look on; he will not listen. Imagine how incensed God must have been to shun what He usually desired.

Does God accept all of our worship? (Amos 5:18-23)

It depends. He sometimes accepts our worship and other times He may not accept it. So we have to figure out why God shunned their worship. We get a clue in verse 24. "But" in contrast to; instead of the worship you've been doing that I will not accept, "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." So God wanted

justice & righteousness in their lives. Though they participated in all the rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices of worship, their lives did not show that they were affected by their encounter with God. They did not come into or go out from the worship service and live different lives. They live unjust and unrighteous lives.

The Lord rejects worship not backed up by lives of ever-flowing justice towards others. They thought that going to a worship event, giving an offering and singing songs was enough for God to accept it. But their worship was divorced from any devotion to God. Their worship was not backed up by lives that demonstrated love to God. God would not accept this twofaced living. Their worship was more like pagan worship. The pagans believed you could live however you wanted as long as you appeased or pacified the god or gods. You could live an unethical or immoral life as long as you paid enough to the temple. Israel acted in a similar matter. So God did not accept their worship.

Now Amos was not the only one to warn about the possibility of God rejecting over worship. Later prophets repeated this message. Isaiah 1:14 – “Your new moons and your appointed feasts, my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. Jeremiah 6:20 – What use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices pleasing to me. David said in Psalm 51:16 “For you will not delight in sacrifice or I would give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.” Psalm 66:18 states “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”

So God completely rejected Israel’s worship to wake them up to this deep error. If God continued to accept worship not backed up by changed lives, what motivation would they have to change? If we think we can attend a worship service and after living however we want in defiance of God’s ways, and we offer no repentance or confession, we can’t conclude God accepts our worship. We’ve learned throughout Amos that God cannot be bought off. God will not ignore injustice in the lives of His people. God will not accept participation in a worship service to excuse such behavior.

In God’s eyes, there is no separation between worship and right living. Right living is worship. Worship separated from right living is not worship.

What can we do to ensure God accepts our worship? (Amos 5:24-27)

Verse 24 gives us the key. “But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

We must back up our worship with ever-flowing imperfect justice-filled & righteousness-filled lives. Amos sketches a very powerful image for his listeners. They lived in a semi-arid region of the world. It was very dry and did not receive a

lot of rain. Creek beds frequently dried up. They would get their water in flash floods instead of a regular flows. They were used to quick rushes of water and intermittent streams.

But a once a year push on justice and occasional righteousness would not do in God's eyes. He does not want a big push on justice for a little while and then a several month break. He doesn't want righteousness that shows up in our lives once a month. He wants justice to roll down like waters. To let it be like constant tumbling waters in a mighty river. God wants righteousness to flow like an ever flowing stream from our lives. God calls us to live lives of constant justice and righteousness. Now of course none of us can do that perfectly. That's why I've included the word imperfect here.

But God calls us to strive for a lifestyle of justice and righteousness. Jesus lived like this. He constantly intervened and acted on behalf of the vulnerable, sick, oppressed, disabled, and demon possessed. He did it without sinning. In dependence on God's strength and power, we can live lives where justice and righteousness flows from God into us and through to others. When our heart and orientation focuses on others for their good, we can be sure God is doing a work in our lives. We have responded and opened our lives up to Him. Then He will accept our worship. But it needs to be consistent & ongoing.

One commentator illustrates the necessity of consistency like this. "A covenant cannot merely be kept now and then. No one can say, "I keep my marriage covenant. I commit adultery only every few days. The rest of the time, I am completely faithful to my spouse. Justice and righteousness cannot stop and start like a wilderness that flows with water only during the rainy seasons and otherwise is just a dry stream bed. They must flow from us day and night, all year, like a strong stream that never goes dry." We get that stream by constantly connecting to the Lord.

Now my final question is "**What would/might an ever-flowing imperfect stream of justice and righteousness look like in our lives?**" Well one of the great blessings of being part of the church family at SVBC is that we can see many examples of people living like this in our congregation. We've got the Mustard Seed ministry for street or disadvantaged people. We've got the Kindred House ministry and prayer partners for those caught up in working the streets. Prism and Rainbows is coming in the winter for those going through the trauma of a family death or divorce. We support the Pregnancy Care Center which offers families in crisis with an unexpected or unplanned pregnancy support and resources to bring their child into this world. Our deaf ministry is staffed by many who care for and are committed to connecting with our deaf community. Many of you give of your time, resources and energy to help ministries in other places. Our

local outreach team partners with the community on initiatives like coats for kids, shoes for kids, hospital hygiene kits and Kinette's Christmas hampers. Some contribute to our little food bank or the St. Albert food bank. Our mission's team assists and empowers those bringing the Gospel and hope to people in need of it around the world. People volunteer throughout our church family in many different ways. So there are many examples of people living this out all around us in this church community. All of this is part of worshipping our Mighty God.

But God also calls us to ensure justice and righteousness towards others constantly flows out of our personal lives as well. This needs to happen at work where employers practice fair and equitable treatment for their employees. Or we stand up for our coworker be mistreated just because of the color of their skin or the way they talk. We need to talk fairly and equitably about our bosses and managers. When I overhear coffee conversations at the coffee shop, you'd think every manager or boss in the world is an idiot and knows nothing. There may be much room for growth in a manager or boss – I know I need to grow in lots of areas – but most managers are not completely inept.

What about justice and righteousness at home? Does justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream in our home? Do we treat our children equitably or show favoritism? What about our spouses? What about standing up for one family member getting picked on by another member or members?

Or what about at school? Do we speak up when someone vulnerable gets taunted? Do we join in or just ignore it? What about in a senior's home? Is there fair and respectful treatment of the elderly? And do the elderly offer fair and respectful treatment of the staff?

Or how about confronting one of our friends about a sin they're committing against their spouse or children or workers or boss or parents or siblings? It takes a pretty strong friendship to endure that. Sometimes, confronting a friend about a sin leads to the end of the friendship. Hopefully, we are mature enough to receive loving correction from others and be willing to look at our own lives.

The Lord calls us to worship Him by living a life from which comes an ever-flowing stream of justice and righteousness. And the Lord expected that of the Israelites. He concludes His speech with a question and a warning.

Verse 25 – “Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?” We're not a 100% sure about the point of this question. Does Amos expect them to answer yes or no? If he expects a yes answer, that they did offer sacrifices in the wilderness to the Lord, he could be pointing them back to a time of closeness

with God. Though there were certainly problems, the wilderness wanderings were seen as a time when Israel was close to the Lord. Some of you have experienced this – when you’re in the wilderness there’s a lot less distraction. So he could be asking them to remember when their forefathers sacrificed in the wilderness and they walked closely with the Lord.

Or, he could be expecting them to answer “no, they didn’t bring sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness.” After all, they weren’t a settled people producing cattle and crops. The laws for sacrifice were given with an expectation of settling in the Promised Land. So if they expected answer is no, then Amos’ point would be – “You didn’t bring sacrifices and offerings to God during the wilderness wanderings but you still worshipped Him. So worship rituals were not essential to actual worship.” Either way, he’s emphasizing the point that their worship was flawed because their lives were flawed.

But then comes a warning – verses 26-27. He prophesies about the coming destruction on Israel. Most of them would not heed this warning. They will take up the images of the star gods they worshipped and carry them along to exile. Most would not turn back to the Lord and suffer the fate of exile. It will be the dark day of the Lord for them.

But it doesn’t have to be that way for us. Maybe God has used this passage today to awaken our souls. Maybe we came here today convinced that everything was good between us and God because we came to church – we did God a favor – we fulfilled our religious duty and God should be satisfied with that. Though you might not have thought in those terms, maybe that’s what’s been happening.

Now you realize how you live your life during the week is part of your worship. Or maybe God has worked in your soul during our time together. He may have revealed that you’re life shows little or no concern for the vulnerable. Maybe you don’t believe there is a need for justice it. If that’s you, then I can tell you I was once there. I had a hard heart towards people in need. God has been working on me for years to soften my heart and help me become more like Him. You can relate to any of this, I invite you to confess any sins of omission that you may have committed by ignoring the vulnerable, lonely and oppressed.

If you agree that there needs to be justice and righteousness but think you can just do it on your own, you need Christ. We cannot carry out pure justice in our own strength. We can engage in acts of justice. But it might be for the wrong reasons. It might be because of our belief in some cause, or our desire to feel good about ourselves. We need the Lord’s power to do justice and righteousness in His strength and for His glory.

If you've never received Him, please call out to Him today. Please turn to Christ as your only hope and salvation to rescue you from a life of injustice and unrighteousness – for that is sin. The only rescue from it is Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. The Lord God did not reject that offering. He accepted it as a perfect substitution for us.

But to many of you, I want to commend your lives of justice and ever flowing righteousness. Thank you for being such examples to all of us. Continue to depend on the Lord's strength to carry out his justice ministries. Let all of us join those already living this way so that SVBC might become known as a people where justice flows like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream to the glory of God! God will receive the worship of those whose lives back up their praises. May it be true of all of us!