

## **“Learning To Do Good”**

Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – August 7, 2022

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might live our lives in such a way that our worship pleases you. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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I wonder: How much of the rest of your week is here with you while you're in worship? I'm not talking about whether you're going over your grocery list while we're praying or looking up baseball scores on your phone. As our Calls to Worship often remind us, it is essential that we set aside distractions when we come to worship, so we can center our hearts and minds fully on God. But our scripture lessons today are dramatic reminders that what we do with the rest of our week is always connected to what we do here on Sunday morning. In both passages, God is making clear that in order for our worship to be authentic, it must be grounded in generous, loving, ethical behavior.

This need to connect our worship here on Sunday mornings with the way we live everywhere else the rest of the week is one of the central challenges of the church. If what you're doing and saying here isn't impacting the rest of your life, what is the point? So let's look at this question a little more closely, and think about what these verses can teach us. An important thing to consider is why we worship in the first place. For many of us, the first answer to this question is that we have an innate need to worship, which we might describe simply as a deep love of God. Now, I will be

the first to say that brain chemistry varies widely from human to human, and that this affects spirituality in ways we've only just begun to unpack. But for many of us who are here, we are wired in such a way that part of our understanding of love and desire to express our love of God compels us to gather to worship God.

Beyond that instinctive need to worship, we see hints in our scriptures today about the formational aspects of worship. Our rituals may not be the same as the Israelites addressed in these passages, but we have rituals too, and they give us a sense of identity and community just as surely as the new moon convocations and sacrifices did those Isaiah was addressing. That sense of belonging, in turn, brings us comfort. When we pass the peace, when we pass the bread, when we pass the offering plate, we are reminding one another that we are welcome and cherished here in this place. It is good to be home.

But again, no matter how good it feels to be here together, we know that we don't gather simply for the sake of gathering. Part of what we're doing here in worship is always about equipping us to leave this place and carry our love for God and our identity as followers of Jesus and part of the family of God into the rest of the world. Worship reminds us to give thanks. The rituals themselves are spiritual disciplines that help us remember that we are people called to make a difference in the world, through the power of God's love and mercy. There is a lot out there in the world trying to discourage us from being loving and merciful, so we gather here to remember why we want to be that way, rather than giving in to apathy and cynicism.

And that brings us back to one of the fundamental lessons in these two passages. In order for our worship of God to be a sincere expression of love, we must also be loving our neighbors. Psalm 50 is perhaps the clearer of the two, especially if you read the whole thing and not just the portion we heard this morning. The point is that God already holds all the things – the heavens, the earth, the animals the ancient Israelites sacrificed, the money we might share – it’s all already God’s. So us offering it is merely symbolic. The question is whether it’s an empty symbol, or one that is backed up by our sharing what we have with others in need. If you want to worship me, God is saying, show your love by loving your neighbors. I don’t need your food; but there are hungry people who do. The problem here, both in Psalm 50 and in Isaiah 1, is that the people haven’t been sharing, so their worship is disingenuous and offensive.

Take a look at verse 17 in Psalm 50: “If I were hungry, I would not tell you,” God says, “for the world and all that is in it is mine.” There is a strong “I’m not mad; I’m disappointed” mom energy here, isn’t there? Hear that once more: “If I were hungry, I would not tell you.” How broken must this relationship be for God to say such a thing? How badly must the Israelites have been neglecting their obligations to care for the needy for God to express the divine disappointment this way? Or look at verse 14 in Isaiah 1: “Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.” This is how deeply hypocritical worship displeases God.

So how do we avoid engaging in worship that is insincere? You would think from the amount of words spilled describing how badly it's being done that it might be really hard to do it right. But here's what interesting to me about these passages and the question of how to worship with integrity. This sermon really could just be one verse. Isaiah 1, verse 17: "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

Why is it that the bad behavior and the hypocrisy of worshiping God without loving our neighbors takes so many words, but the explanation of how to do it right is so succinct, simple even? "Learn to do good." It reminds me of that piece of advice you sometimes hear: "Tell the truth; it's easier to remember." We know this is how it is. When we're doing the right thing, we don't need long explanations for our behavior. But when we're bending the rules or blatantly abandoning our own standards for ethical conduct, we've got lots of words to justify our choices, don't we? If we put enough extra words in, we can even pretend some words are saying the opposite of what they really mean. But if you really want to honor me, God says, it's as simple as this: "cease to do evil, learn to do good."

It's so interesting to look this far back into history to reflect on our own attempts at connecting our worship to the rest of our lives. We need to be careful, because there are lots of stereotypes and assumptions that can get in our way. You may have heard people talk about the "wrathful, Old Testament God," implying that the Christian God Jesus introduces in the gospels is superior to the Jewish deity from

the Hebrew scriptures. But is that who you see here? Is it wrathful to say, “If I were hungry, I would not tell you,” or is it more like something a disappointed mother would say? Is it wrathful to invite us to “argue it out,” with the promise that our sins that “are like scarlet” can become like snow? No, the deep compassion and mercy of God are obvious in these passages alongside the disappointment and disgust with the unethical behavior of God’s people. There is no Old Testament God versus New Testament God; that is a subtly antisemitic trope perpetuated by folks who haven’t spent enough time reading the Psalms or the prophets.

We could just as easily be distracted by God calling the Israelites “you rulers of Sodom” and “you people of Gomorrah.” But again, spend enough time in the Hebrew scriptures, and you’ll discover that the references to these cities are always about the people’s neglect of the poor and needy, not some narrow interpretation of sexual mores.

We may find it hard to relate to God’s rejection of burnt offerings and new moon convocations, since those are not practices we’re familiar with. But we do have our own rituals that are supposed to represent our commitment to the Body of Christ and the family of God. We don’t need to make it more complicated than it is, by getting hung up on all the extra words. “Cease to do evil, learn to do good.” We honor God and show our love for God in our worship by actively loving our neighbors in the rest of our lives. And when loving our neighbors gets hard – if we have trouble collecting the needed resources, or our neighbors aren’t particularly

grateful for what we offer, or it seems they want more than we can offer – that’s when we come back to worship. And that’s when we hope and pray that our worship here is more than just rituals that comfort us with their familiarity and the sense of belonging they give us. That’s when we hope and pray that our worship can help us complete the cycle between recognizing and giving thanks for our blessings and being inspired to share those blessings with others. Our rituals of thanksgiving must also be rituals of commitment to generosity. Our rituals of community within these walls must always remind us of our obligation to the family of God outside these walls. We want to be the sort of people God would come to if God were hungry. And we become those people by committing ourselves to feeding the hungry people who do come to us. May our worship always help us learn to do good. Hallelujah and Amen.