

When God Refuses to Listen

We pray our prayers, we sing our songs to God. What is "good" worship? What is the true test of Christian prayer and praise? The prophet tells us that we must link our worship to our lives, that we must test our liturgy by our ethics, that justice is a good criterion for the validity of our worship.

Isaiah 1:1,10-20

The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! "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. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Reflections

Integrity

When I think about the model the Bible presents for how we should reconcile praise and prayer with our lives, the word, "integrity," comes to mind. So, I asked a few people how they would define "integrity." Here are some of the responses:

- "Doing what you say you're going to do."
- "Doing right by others based on real world exigencies."
- "Not being a hypocrite."
- "Being true, honest."

Consulting a couple of dictionaries, I found that they had pretty much captured the word. The *American Heritage* dictionary indicates "integrity" emerges from the Latin, *integritas*, meaning "soundness," and from *integer* meaning "whole." *Webster's* defines "integrity" as an unimpaired condition: soundness; adherence to a code of moral or other values; quality of being complete or undivided. Both dictionaries suggest synonyms of honesty and unity.

The Old Testament writers repeatedly remind us that we must dem-

onstrate integrity. We must walk the talk: we praise God best when we do what he asks of us. Zechariah delivers God's unflinching response to the Bethel priests' question about proper fasting: "...was it really for me that you fasted?... administer true justice; show mercy and compassion..." (Zec. 7:5-9). Micah gently conveys how to approach the Lord: "He has shown you, O man, what is good. To act justly... to love mercy... to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:6-8).

Generations later, Jesus models how to live and pray with integrity. He teaches us to pray to our Father in heaven. "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done" (Luke 11:1-4). We should pray for the strength to carry out God's will "on earth as in heaven." In Gethsemane, Jesus demonstrates prayer that admits agonizing fear, yet surrenders to God's will. Instead of bargaining with God in prayer, we can remain whole, undivided from God when we face our fears with faith.

We pray and offer praise to draw nearer to God in our joy and in our anguish. God is not changed by our praise and prayers; we are. We are transformed, not because of

some formulaic "prayers-in-blessings-out approach" (Batstone), but through our faith in God and our obedience to him.

Integrity to God's word directs our prayers and lives. Speaking at the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast, Bono, lead singer of the Irish rock band U2 told of a wise man he admires. Before embarking on a tour, Bono had asked the man for God's blessings for his travels, the concerts, etc. The wise man told him, "Stop asking for God to bless what you're doing. Get involved in what God is doing because it is already blessed." Word and action born of faith and aligned with God's will. These are offerings we can bring to the Lord humbly and with integrity.

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References

David Batstone. *The Prayer of Jabez Falls Short in Africa*. February 9, 2006. See www.sojo.net
 Bono. Keynote Address, 54th National Prayer Breakfast. February 2, 2006. See www.speakingoffaith.publicradio.org

Readings

Don't have a Bible? Access these scriptures at biblegateway.com.

Readings

Sunday, August 12

Isaiah 1:10-20 What could make your worship more meaningful? How can you tie it to your actions?

Monday, August 13

Zechariah 7:5-9 Are there times when your worship seems to be more for you than for God? What are some ways to redirect this when you think it's happening?

Tuesday, August 14

Micah 6:6-8 Justice and mercy are mentioned numerous times throughout the Bible as actions God requires of us. Why do you think this is so?

Wednesday, August 15

Acts 8: 18-25 Simon learns that what Peter and John are doing is nothing like the magic he practices. How does a belief that one can obligate God to do the "right" things affect our prayer and our relationship with God? What does this belief say about faith?

Thursday, August 16

Matthew 26:36-42 What does Jesus' prayer to his Father in his time of agony reveal about his relationship to the Father? Discuss how Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane differs from a belief that one can bargain with God in prayer.

Friday, August 17

Hebrews 11:1-6 How do faith and surrendering to God's will (e.g., Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane) relate? Why does God regard Abel's sacrifice as better than Cain's (see Genesis 4: 1-12)?

Saturday, August 18

Luke 11:1-4 What is Jesus teaching us about prayer? What two concerns related to God come first in this prayer? Discuss how the prayer, for example, "your kingdom come (your will be done)," responds to Old Testament prophets' call for the people to come before God with sincerity and to "act justly" (Micah 6: 8) or "stop doing wrong and learn to do right" (Isaiah 1: 16-17). How do forgiveness and prayer relate?



Let's Serve & Invite!

This summer check out this spot for simple ideas about how to extend hope into our surrounding community. We'll share practical tips you can use at work and at play, on your own and with your family, to encourage others in the name of Christ.

Do something difficult.

While there are lots of simple things we can do to serve others, let this week be a reminder that sometimes we are called to do something that "costs" us. Go out of your way. Take the extra time for someone. What action for a neighbor or coworker is inconvenient, yet you sense it is God calling? Serve them NOW and do it with joy! The cost you pay is an offering to our worthy God.

Then talk to your children about this principle.

Got an idea? Email
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