

Article

Worship and justice (1) – why does it matter?

An uncomfortable summary

“I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.

When was the last time you sang to me?

Do you know what I want?

I want justice—oceans of it.

I want fairness—rivers of it.

That’s what I want. That’s all I want.”

(Amos 5:23-24, The Message)

Justice and worship belong together because to love others is to love God (1 John 4:7-12), and to worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24) can only lead us to catch God’s heart – especially for the poor, the broken, and the lost because this is who he especially came for (Matthew 5 and Luke 19:10). So what does just worship look like?

Clearly we know it can’t look anything like the kind of scenes depicted in Amos 5 or Isaiah 58:1-5. It cannot be a corporate or private display of religious observance without a life lived in accordance with it. And that whole-life worship cannot be defined purely as achieving personal purity. It must also move beyond ourselves to include loving others with the kind of extravagance symbolised by rivers and oceans – constantly giving, and continuously drinking from the source.

But it can’t ever forget that it is devotion either. A series of good deeds is not worship, but instead we need to partner with, and offer to, the Father of all justice, as we seek to love him with all our hearts, minds, bodies and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Mark 12:29-31). Just worship must remain in him, for him, and led by him.

Defining worship and justice

Worship

Worship is a huge word which has very different resonances depending on context and the background of the person using it. We all agree on its meaning – literally to give something or someone worth. And of course in the Christian context, this person of worth, is the ultimate one – God himself; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But Christians use it to refer to one or all of the following things at different times in our day to day language:

- A time of **singing** songs of praise and adoration to God. (N.B. can also refer to a recording – i.e. ‘I’m listening to worship’)
- A **service or meeting** where believers gather together, which is likely to include hymns and songs, prayers, intercessions and a sermon – i.e. ‘Sunday worship is at 10:30am and 6:30pm’.
- **Any outward (or inward) response through any media of expression** to God of praise, prayer, or devotion – whether expressed through words, posture or simply the offering of the heart in silent prayer – i.e. ‘When I see the beauty of God’s creation, I cannot help worshipping him’.

- **Intimate adoration** of God – i.e. ‘After a time of praise and declaring who God is, we moved into worship in response.’
- **Any outward (or inward) response through a variety of heart postures** to God, including praise, adoration, devotion, thanks, petition, intercession, lament, questioning etc – i.e. ‘We tried to find a way to express our worship in the midst of grieving, so we sang Tim Hughes’ song ‘I’ve had questions’ to help the congregation process the death of our friend.’
- In the broadest sense – **the offering of our whole lives** as ‘living sacrifices’ (Romans 12:1-3)– orientating our whole beings towards God which will affect our songs and prayers, but also our lifestyles, spending, actions and careers as we allow God to redeem and sanctify all things for his glory – i.e. ‘Let’s make sure we live lives of worship’ or ‘Let’s make sure we worship God in everything we do’. This context is often used alongside the first one in this list in many parts of the church today, to discuss a degree of **authenticity** and correlation between the songs we sing on Sundays, and the lives we live Monday to Saturday.
- Used less frequently by us, but of course the **Israelites worship included offerings, grain offerings and animal sacrifices.**

Worship is all these things, and more, and none of these definitions are wrong – they are layers, and facets of the same thing.

Part of the problem is that, similar to love (*storge*, *agape*, *charis*, *eros* and *phileo* in Greek), there are not just two words for ‘praise’ and ‘worship’ used in the Bible, but many, in both Hebrew and Greek (and therefore in both Testaments). However, most of our translations do not distinguish between them most of the time, and our language and usage has muddled the frames of reference still further.

Perhaps we need to consciously introduce some new language, which specifies more helpfully the application of how we are using the word, and recognise the rich diversity and depth of its meaning. We might start with;

- **Sung worship**
- **Corporate acts of worship**
- **Adorational worship**
- **Devotional worship**
- **Declarational worship; lamenting worship; prayerful worship; intercessional worship etc**
- **Whole-life worship – incorporating holy living, sacrifice, perseverance in suffering, generosity and loving others**
- **Burnt offering and grain offering worship**

And justice?

In many ways this is clearer – the Oxford English dictionary defines justice as:

Just behaviour or treatment: a concern for justice, peace, and genuine respect for people.

- *The quality of being fair and reasonable; the justice of his case*
- *The administration of the law or authority in maintaining this: a tragic miscarriage of justice.*

However, God’s definition of justice seems to be much more outrageous than our rational balancing of right and wrong. He is perfect, just and true, but this leads to his grace constantly restoring Israel in the Old Testament, and giving his Son for us in order to make atonement for our sins. He is holy and desires righteousness, but he knows that people will always fall short of his glory and so he justified them once and for all, and again and again, if they

will simply believe, and accept Jesus' grace (Romans 3:23). What's more, he gives us his own Spirit to teach and empower us to live in a totally different way (John 14:26).

It doesn't take long to realise that God's justice, is proactively merciful. We don't get what we justly deserve – we get his just and righteous acts – which are laden with seemingly unjust compassion.

This perspective is mirrored in how we are taught to relate to each other. We are told to show love for our neighbour and even our enemy (Matthew 5:43-48), and offer the same kind of outrageous justice that God does to them. In this latter context, the term justice is often used in a very specific way in the Bible to relate to the treatment of the poor – frequently summarised as the widow, the orphan, and the stranger - i.e. the vulnerable (Deuteronomy 24:17-22). Not depriving these groups of justice is more than not taking advantage of them – it is also proactively giving mercy and compassionately stepping in to provide.

We are called to 'act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before our God' (Micah 6:8) but crucially this statement goes on to cover heart attitudes as well as outward acts. We are to *act* justly to others, but we must also *love* the opportunity to give mercy (rather than resent it, or view it as somehow elevating us above others). And we are to *walk humbly* before God – ready to lay down our status with others, and eager to submit to God.

It's an outrageous grace that expresses justice in such a way – that offers love not just to those whom society has rejected, but to their rejecters also. That justifies people not by their qualifications, credentials, or track record, but by their weakness, and willingness to receive the strongest love that there ever was, laid down on their behalf.

The great tensions of Christianity

In many ways, to explore the meaning of worship and justice, and the relationship between them, is to open a much wider discussion, for it leads us to the central tension of Christianity.

Jesus summarises the whole law in one statement (Mark 12:29-31). Following God's priorities, and living in the ways he has laid out is crucial – but we love him also through our love of others – our action or inaction towards others is vitally important to God.

We are called to faith not works (Galatians 2:16) – yet faith without works is dead (James 2:17). We are called to love God above all others – but if we don't love others we can't really love God. We are saved by grace and not by anything we do – but we have not grasped grace if we do nothing. Mary Magdalene is honoured for focusing her devotional worship on Jesus (Matthew 26:6-13) above all, even when the money for such extravagance could be spent on the poor, but we are told that when we feed the poor and clothe the naked, we are doing this to Jesus (Matthew 25:34-40).

The point is to embrace these tensions. We must reject the notion that it is 'either/or', and move to a new way of thinking which embraces 'both/and'. It's time to passionately love God in intimate devotion, and in whole-life worship that serves the poor, the broken and the nations.

Unjust undoes worship

There is a worrying tendency in all of us to become religious. We easily forget our inherent brokenness, and the fact that everything we have is grace and mercy from God and instead start to see ourselves as separate, better, or set-apart from others to a degree which reduces the worth of those currently outside the 'club' of the righteous. It was an attitude present in Jewish culture when prophets such as Amos and Isaiah were writing; it was present in Jewish culture when Jesus encountered the Pharisees (Matthew 23); and it is present in the church today, because to some degree it is present in all of our hearts.

It is this false religion – not all devotion - which God despises, and rejects in passages such as Amos 5. It reeks of self-atonement in the face of the grace and mercy we have been given. And it leads us to separate ourselves from others who are in exactly the same position as us.

Most offensive to God is when we talk about this attitude and behaviour as if it was worship. When we act as if separating ourselves, and viewing ourselves as purer than others is what he desires as devotion.

No. True religion is this – to look after orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27). The kind of worship God is seeking is that which feeds the hungry and welcomes the homeless poor into our homes (Isaiah 58: 6-7) – as well as the kind that celebrates what he has done for us, and seeks his guidance in our lives.

Unconnected justice loses love

So why do we need to talk about justice in the context of worship at all? Is it not enough that we ensure we are living authentic whole-life worship which reaches out to the poor and broken? If we take action and prioritise mission, as well as allowing our personal lifestyles to be changed, surely that's the job done. We are being obedient, and loving God by loving others – our songs sound sweet again... and in fact, do we even really need to be singing them at all?

Yes we do!

Acting justly and loving mercy are forms of worship, but they are not the fullness of worship. Coming back to our initial definitions of worship, whole-life worship is more than loving the poor and the broken. And worship is much more than good actions. It is 'both and' – corporate acts of worship that express upward devotion, as well as outward compassion, are vital. Our devotional lives must flourish – corporately and individually. There can never be enough songs to express our response to our loving, ever-faithful Father.

It is good to worship – in fullness of type of expression, but also to full capacity in passion. If we become over-focussed on justice issues, or any form of outward focussed action which is part of our whole-life worship, we begin to lose authenticity with our hearts. If they too are not focussed on our heart's language of worship – devotion – then we drift into another area of worship that God does not accept.

He is just as disinterested in our ego-justice as in our ego-music. What he will want then is to bring us back to the centre with ever-flowing streams of devotion, and vast oceans full of heartfelt adoration. After all, we can prophesy, have great faith, and give everything to the poor – but if we don't have love – we have nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3) And as we have seen, loving God must be multi-directional – it should move horizontally to our neighbour, but crucially, and above all, it must pour itself out vertically to God.

In addition, a wider expression of worship, and a healthy personal relationship with God, are vitally important if the justice we express is to remain grounded and effective. Separating acts of justice and mercy from worship in its wider sense can lead us to a number of other problems:

- Getting pulled in different directions as we respond to every need and injustice we see.
- Losing our awareness of God's love, and a growing sense that we have to earn God's favour or somehow self-justify ourselves.
- Experiencing compassion fatigue, resentment, or sheer burn-out. This can lead to bitterness, discouragement, and possibly a decision to give up trying to make a difference.
- Doing everything in our own strength. This can lead to missing out on guidance and breakthrough, going off course. But at worst we start to think it is about us.

No. God is the source of all grace and compassion. He is love – and we are simply channels for it to flow from him and through and beyond us, to those in need. We are partners and tools who work with him as agents of change. We are not the change-makers. It is not by our power, or our might that anything good happens. It is through the Holy Spirit working through us (Zechariah 4:6). It is not because of our ability and credentials that God chooses to use us, but through his grace. We do not have limitless resources in and of ourselves– we are not the world’s saviours; we must allow him to remind us of his love and grace for us, and to fill us again with vision, energy, wisdom and strength.

And it is God who rejoices, even more than us, when justice is done – when the poor are fed, and the weary are restored. It is definitely something to sing about, and to share with the one who inspired it all.

This article is part one of two articles considering this topic. ‘Worship and justice 2 – Creating an ever-flowing stream’ continues the discussion to consider practically applying these ideas so that we create a new sound. You can find it at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles)