

Lips and lives * Amos 5 (Isaiah 1:13-14, Jeremiah 6:20)
October 18, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

You might find this hard to believe, but there are times when God hates people going to church. There are some religious activities that God absolutely despises.

As counter-intuitive as it might seem, that's a message that you hear over and over again in the OT prophets. Before the Exile happened, people were going about, doing their own thing, wandering away from the God who loves them like no one else does. Their hearts were just as far from God on the Sabbath as they were the rest of the week and so God sent prophets to say – 'I can't stand your religious activities!'

Amos 5:21 – God says - 21 "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.
22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.
23 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.
(Amo 5:21-24 NIV).

Isaiah 1:13 says – 13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
14 Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them (Isa 1:13-14 NIV).

And Jeremiah 6:21 says - 20 What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me." (Jer 6:20 NIV).

Why? Why does God seem so put off by their worship? And are there times today when God looks at our churches with the same frustration?

Well, I want to work with Amos 5 as we answer that question, so let's go there. Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos – in your Bible.

Amos 5:21: God says: 'I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.' Clearly the people of God are gathering together to worship God but for some reason, He can't stand it. They're making their offerings and singing their songs – they're doing all the things that God said they should - but to God it's like nails on a chalkboard. Why is that? Well, slide your finger up the page a little and you'll find out. Verse 7 - To the people who are throwing these feasts and having these assemblies, He says -

7 You who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground...
10 you hate the one who reproves in court (essentially "you hate the one who renders fair verdicts") and despise him who tells the truth.
11 You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain...
Verse 12: ...You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.
13 Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil.

That's why God hates their religion – because it's not backed up by ethical action.

They're going to church on Sundays and 'praising God' then going home and acting in very ungodly ways the rest of the time. They're cutting corners and bending rules; they're burying the truth and stacking the decks in their favour; they're giving and taking bribes to get ahead in life – they are not honouring God with their lives...

...which calls into question whether or not they are actually honouring God with their worship.

Do you see what I mean? The way it should work - ritual action and ethical action come from the same place – a heart that is fixed on God. And if your heart is fixed on God, then you'll want to honour Him both by loving Him in church and loving your neighbour in the world. True religion means worship in the seats and justice in the streets.

But that's not what these people were doing. They were going to church, (not church, but going to temple), they were going through the motions, and then going home and living for themselves. They were honouring God with their lips but not with their lives.

And so God sends Amos to say 'I hate, I despise your ritual activity, because it's not backed up with ethical actions, which means that your hearts are truly far from me.' And so off they went into Exile.

And even though God eventually brought a faithful remnant back, this was exactly the problem Jesus ran into in His day. He actually quoted Isaiah in Matthew 8: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." (Mat 15:8 NIV).ⁱ That's the problem at the heart of this message – empty religion.

And that's a problem in our day too. I've seen too many people through the years who have come to church on Sunday and gone home and lived for themselves the rest of the week. They come to church on Sunday and go through the motions of loving God in song, but then go home and fail to love their neighbour which implies that they never really loved God in the first place! And so God says, 'if you're not going to honour me on Monday, don't bother coming to church on Sunday.'

God hates when our religious actions are not back up by ethical ones, when what we do at church is not backed up by what we do in the world, because that implies that our hearts are far from Him.

But God delights when we honour Him with our lips and with our lives. I've used the language of 'hate' because that's what God said in Amos, but flip over the coin. As much as God despises hearts that 'honour' Him at church but not at home, God delights in people whose love for Him overflows both in church and in the world. God delights when we honour Him with our lips and with our lives.

And this is where I need to speak directly to you.

No one loves you like God does. How great the love the Father has lavished upon us that we should be called children of God. If we're going to honour God in our response for that steadfast, tender commitment, then we need to do it with our lips and with our lives.

The problem here in Amos is not religious practice in and of itself. Going to church, singing the hymns, giving your offering – that's all good! We need to do it! But it needs to be matched by justice in the world, springing from a heart that is wholly devoted to God. I left off the most important verse in Amos 5 earlier - 23 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

24 But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:23-24 NIV).

Don't just honour God with your lips; honour God with your lives. Have a Sunday heart every day of the week.

I want to thank you for being here, for giving over your Sunday morning to hear from God. It shows that you know the love of God and that you want to respond to it in a meaningful way. Good. You are honouring God with your lips. That a good thing.

But don't stop there. Honour God with your life too. Don't cut corners, don't bend the rules, don't take advantage of others because you've got more power or influence or social capital than they do. Honour God by acting with justice and righteousness (more on that next week by the way). Honour God by valuing the truth and prioritizing what's right. God delights when we honour Him with our lips AND with our lives.

Now I know I've used this before but I think it says it so well that I'll say it again. Years ago, a Christian author, Brennan Manning, wrote:

The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.

God hates that. God hates that because it's pushing people away from His goodness and He hates that because it's exactly the problem that Amos talked about: going through the motions in church and going home and living for themselves.

Let's sidestep that trap. We're too clever for that. Let's shine a light so people see how good God is. Let's walk out of church so overwhelmed by the love of God that we go home and overflow with goodness to the world around us. Let's sing God's praise in worship and in the way we treat others too. Let's honour God with our lips and with our lives.

BENEDICTION

2 Th. 2:16-17 - Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

ⁱ Isa 29:13 The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."