

Worship • Isaiah 1:10-20

Seven Rhythms • April 14, 2024 • www.isonrise.com

Have you ever lied to your mother-in-law? I have. I would not recommend it. We were on a camping trip with my wife's family and their friends about 15 years ago. Lindsey and I were still in our early years of marriage. I was welcomed into her family quickly at the beginning of our dating relationship. At the time of this trip, my relationship with my in-laws was still relatively new. This trip was an opportunity to have some good bonding time with my new family and their close circle of friends.

One of the nights we were there the group decided to play a game called "mafia." As a youth pastor, I was very familiar with this game and had become pretty good at it. The game encouraged you to form alliances, sway people's opinions, and manipulate your enemies. I don't know what this says about me, but I was good at all of those things. The game involves several consecutive rounds where the group votes off people who are suspected enemies of the "townspeople." These enemies are called the "mafia." The mafia is a minority group, while the townspeople are the majority group. The mafia has to use all their social and rhetorical skills to convince the rest of the town that they are not bad guys. We got to the final round and there were two townspeople left, my mother-in-law and her friend, and one mafia member, me. I was able to convince my mother-in-law that her friend of several decades was a liar and a threat. We voted her out and the game was over. The narrator announced that the mafia had won, but my mother-in-law didn't hear the announcement, because she was so overjoyed that she and her new son-in-law had claimed victory. Eventually, one of her friends explained that I had fooled her and the townspeople, her people, had lost because she trusted me. Ouch! I won... but I didn't win. She got over the betrayal but didn't want to hear from me in the immediate aftermath of the game. No one likes to hear from a hypocrite.

This is a funny story about betrayal, duplicity, and hypocrisy. We can all understand why my mother-in-law wasn't thrilled to hug me after she learned I had double-crossed her. On a more serious note, I would like to explore today how God responds to betrayal, duplicity, and hypocrisy. As we explore the spiritual rhythm of worship it is essential to consider these behaviors. Worship is often thought of as only all the outward religious expressions we do. These are not bad things, but they can hide the true posture of our hearts. We can play the religious game like I played the game of mafia. We can present ourselves as "townspeople" and really be "mafia." How does God respond to this type of hypocrisy?

Big Idea: God hides from hypocrisy. The word "hide" strikes me sharply. It bears a lot of emotional weight for me. It makes me think of times when I have felt abandoned and alone. It communicates the idea of relational suffering, which I think many of us would agree is one of the deepest forms of pain. God uses this word and others like it to show how he responds to hypocritical worship. God does not like it when we play the "religious game." Isaiah, a prophet in the Old Testament, made this point clear to Israel in his writings. He not only pointed this sin out but also provided a way for them to make it right with God.

Isaiah 1:10-13, ⁴⁰ Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ¹² When you come to appear before me, who has required of

you this trampling of my courts?¹³ Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.”

Israel has suffered from the invasion of a foreign power, which has left them devastated. This attack was either from Aram or from the Assyrians, who would eventually conquer the northern kingdom of Israel. This misfortune certainly bewildered many in Israel. God had promised to protect them from such attacks if they stayed loyal in their worship of God. Israel had maintained the many sacrifices and religious obligations that God detailed out for them to do in the law. Even though Israel has been acting religiously, God was not protecting them as he promised in the covenant that he made with them. Was God being unfaithful or was Israel hiding their hypocrisy behind their religious practices?

Isaiah used creative speech in his indictment of the people of Israel. He called them “Sodom” and “Gomorrah.” These infamous cities were destroyed by God over a thousand years before Isaiah’s time. Several of the other Old Testament prophets called Israel by the name of other pagan people. These nations and cities were known for oppressing the poor, committing sexual sin, and performing detestable sacrifices. At times, Israel would be accused of being even more sinful than the surrounding nations that worshipped false gods. This had to strike at the pride of the people of Israel. God was calling them another name because they were imposters. They may have appeared to be Israelites, but they were actually wicked.

God called their activity in his temple as a “trampling” of his courts. This phrase communicates disrespect and destruction. Isaiah used similar language in chapter 5 when he spoke of God’s judgment of Israel. He likened the destruction to someone destroying a vineyard by breaking down its walls and “trampling” on them. Israel was not worshipping God in their religious activities, but rather desecrating and destroying His place of worship. They were attacking God with their songs and sacrifices.

The people were religiously busy and incredibly duplicitous. In verse 11 we are told that they were giving a “multitude” of sacrifices. They were extremely religious. The financial cost of their sacrifices and offerings would have been considerable. Yet their offerings were categorized as “vain.” These offerings were worthless, having no quality of value in them. Interestingly, God was the one who asked for these offerings and sacrifices. In fact, God gave meticulous details as to how these sacrifices and offerings were to be carried out. Was God changing his mind here? No, he wanted their worship, just without hypocrisy. We can’t read this as if God was against these practices in themselves. “Prayer” is one of the practices that God noted later in our passage. Clearly, God was not against “prayer” in itself. God wanted their offerings, just not ones that were spoiled by sin.

At the end of verse 13, God made clear what had corrupted the worship of his people. He said, *“I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.”* Their sin had poisoned their worship. God called their offerings of incense an “abomination.” This is a strong word, which was used often to describe pagan practices. Isaiah may not only be rebuking Israel for hypocrisy (right practices, but a wrong heart) but also syncretism (wrong practices and a wrong heart).

Notice how God is affected by all of these religious sins. He says that he can not “endure” them and later he speaks of them as being a “burden” to him. God was emotionally and relationally

injured by the hypocrisy of his people. God's strength was not diminished by these attacks, but he was negatively impacted by them. He was not indifferent to this injury and responded sharply.

Isaiah 1:14-15, "44 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood."

God began to "hate" the feast that he called for. He was repulsed by their praise and offended by their offerings. He told his people that he would "hide" from them and not hear their prayers. The hearing and seeing of God was often used by the writers of scripture to describe God's intimacy with his people. This type of language communicated the nearness and the attentiveness of God. Their rebellion masked by religious routines ruined their relationship with their creator. God could not look upon their lifted hands of praise because they were covered in the blood of their murderous acts. God is painfully thorough in his criticism of the worship of his people and he invites them to make it right. He didn't want things to stay like this.

Isaiah 1:16-20, "6 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. 18 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 like crimson, they shall become like wool. 19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; 20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

The command to "wash" was a reference to a ritualistic practice, showing that God was not against rituals, but rather against inauthentic rituals. The ritual was a part of the solution if it was accompanied by a right heart of repentance. Israel needed to turn away from injustice in order to restore their intimacy with God. They needed to not only stop doing evil but also start doing good. They needed to care for those who faced the greatest social and economic disadvantages, widows and orphans. Worship wasn't just about their sacrifices and songs, but about their pursuit of justice and their posture of generosity.

Isaiah didn't just make an indictment but also extended an invitation to experience transformation. God invited Israel to "reason" with him. This was a legal term. It does not indicate that God wanted to discuss the legitimacy of Israel's guilt. That had already been proven, which is why he spoke of their sins being scarlet and red as crimson. God had already made his determination. His verdict was clear. Rather, God wanted to discuss the possibility of pardon and transformation. God wanted to reason with Israel as to how they could right their relationship with him. He wanted to talk about the merits of their two options: repentance and rebellion. What God wanted to speak about was their future and not their past. The language God used indicates transformation and not just forgiveness. He spoke of red turning to white. Snow and wool are white by nature. I believe this hints at the larger biblical theme of transformation. God has not only promised to forgive us of our sins but also to change our sinful nature. He will do the heavy lifting if we will humble ourselves and confess our sins.

God hides from hypocrisy. God hears humility. God wanted Israel to see how their worship had become hollow and vain. He wanted them to notice that their religious routines had become repulsive to him. Israel counted their attendance and offerings and thought they were good. Religious activity can mask a decline in spiritual health. They needed to look past their activities and

acknowledge their lack of moral transformation. God was ready to forgive them and transform them if they would humbly turn back to him.

If you are a follower of Christ, I would like you to ponder an odd question. If God didn't attend our church, would you notice? If God hid from us or withdrew from us would you be able to tell? Without him, we could still perform the same rituals and have the same rhetoric. We could still be very busy and have a full calendar. You would still hear funny jokes, be moved by inspiring stories, and sing beautiful songs. What would we miss without God? Based on our passage, I believe we can say that we would miss confession and transformation. The Holy Spirit transforms us by convicting us of our sins, which causes us to confess, and by changing our hearts, which causes us to love God and others more deeply. God showed Israel their sin and invited them to be cleansed by his transforming work. God invites us to do the same thing. Church would be a lot more comfortable if God didn't attend and it would also be a place without hope. I don't want to be a part of a church like that and I know you don't either.

Maybe you are here and you are not yet following Jesus. I invite you to "reason" with God. This "reasoning" is not meant as an invitation to prove yourself to God by listing your moral qualifications. In this "reasoning," your guilt has already been proven. You would probably admit that you have fallen short of God's standard, and even your own standard. What will you do with that guilt? God has offered you a pardon. God has offered you forgiveness. God has offered to transform you. It is time to consider that offer. What will you do with it? Will you reject it and bear the burden of your guilt? Or, will you receive his grace and have your sins forgiven?

----- **Life Level Application** -----

- 1) Head: Read Isaiah 66:1-4. How does God describe false worship in this passage? What are the consequences that God will bring upon those who practice false worship? Describe the posture of the one the Lord will look upon in verse 2. What do you think it means to "tremble" at God's word?

- 2) Heart: Read Micah 7:18-20. What will God do to the sins of his people? What emotions do you feel when you consider the imagery used by the prophet to describe how God will treat sin?

- 3) Hand: Read 1 Peter 3:7 and Isaiah 59:1-2. How does our behavior affect our prayers? Can you recall a time when you felt God was distant from you? Could this feeling of distance have been caused by your behavior more than God's?

- 4) Habit: Read Psalm 103:1-22. Write God a prayer of thanks for his abundant forgiveness.