

Justice & Worship

BOB HEERSPINK

One of our defining acts as Christians is our worship. It is important for us to gather together as a community to glorify God together. Does Christian justice, though, have a place in this weekly worship gathering? If so, what might it look like? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, I was talking to someone the other day, a friend of mine. He has a grown son, a great young man, who is really concerned about issues of social justice, and wants to see Christian values lived out in the world, but he is not interested in coming to church on Sunday. Worship just is not his thing, and it really strikes me; there are a lot of people today who are going in that direction. It is great to think about impacting our communities, it is not so great to think about gathering with God's people for worship.

DAVE BAST

Bob, I love to see young Christians who have passion for making a better community – making a better society – making a better world; but it breaks my heart if they abandon the Church in order to do that, and think that they have to do that. Sometimes, let's be honest, it is perhaps the Church's fault that we are too complacent, we are too ignorant of, or indifferent to the need for justice in our society; but there is something wrong, too, with a Christian who says: I don't need to worship.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; maybe we need to get back to some of the prophets and listen to what they say about worship and social justice. You know, you go to the prophet Amos, and he has some very harsh things to say about worship; some things that might be echoed by that young man. Let me just read some verses from Amos Chapter 5. There, Amos, speaking for God, says this:

²¹"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps I will not listen. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

DAVE BAST

It is really an indictment of the kind of worship God cannot stand either. You know, the old criticism: The Church is full of hypocrites; well, where that is true and to what extent it is true, it is an abomination to God himself as well. I think we need to understand that and see it clearly.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; if you go to the time of Amos, you actually discover that the Church was really on a roll. Things were really going well in that society when it came to organized religion.

DAVE BAST

A little background may help. Amos was active during about the middle part of the 8th Century BC; that is around the year 750, perhaps 760 BC; and it was the calm before the storm in the northern kingdom of Israel. They didn't have very long to live or survive, because the power of Assyria was rising, and they would be destroyed – they would be wiped away in another generation; but at this moment, things, as you say, were on a roll. They were prosperous, it was peaceful, their king was relatively strong. They were wealthy; at least there was a very wealthy class. There was a huge gap between the rich and the poor, and that was growing, which was part of the problem. The rich people were very materialistic. I wonder if this sounds familiar to anyone in North America?

BOB HEERSPINK

There are things that translate into our world, isn't there?

DAVE BAST

In fact, there is a famous passage earlier in Amos where he talks about cows of Bashan, or to put it in our terms, he might say: The real housewives of Samaria, who were luxury loving, lying on ivory couches and all that while the poor out in the street were being ground into the dust.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, in the midst of all of that Amos shows up, probably at the sanctuary of Bethel, and he says on behalf of God: I hate all this worship; and you know, the priests must have been shocked because everything is going so well; the sacrifices are coming in; the choirs are singing; and now, God says: It doesn't work for me because it doesn't connect with your real life.

DAVE BAST

Yet, to the catalog of characteristics that we would use to describe this society: Wealthy, materialistic, hedonistic, we would add the adjective: Religious – extremely religious...

BOB HEERSPINK

Extremely religious.

DAVE BAST

But there was a disconnect between their worship and their daily lives, and it came in this whole area of justice; and as a result, God says: you know, these offerings you are giving me, they actually stink. They stink in my nostrils.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; for God, as he looks at worship, he wants to see it connected to daily life. That last verse from Amos that I read: ²⁴Let justice flow down like water; it brings to mind a picture of those dry creek beds in Palestine – the wadis – which would only be filled with water during certain parts of the year when the rainy season came; and what Amos is saying: Think about those gushing streams, but now not just seasonal, let them flow with righteousness and justice year round.

DAVE BAST

It is like a flash flood; the rain comes higher up in the desert, and suddenly this creek bed is just filled with a wall of water, and God wants that all the time...

BOB HEERSPINK

All the time.

DAVE BAST

And it is justice; that is what it stands for. He wants that kind of commitment. If our worship is going nowhere – if it doesn't drive us to seek justice, then God cannot stand it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, I think here is the challenge, Dave. We know that as Christians, but very often those issues of social justice don't infuse their way into our worship; that there is still a disconnect. You know, we come and we worship and we go out to the world, but do we really sufficiently bring the two together?

DAVE BAST

And not just bring those things together, we want to ask: Is there a way to worship that can actually reinforce our passion for justice; that can be positive and productive of the kind of people God wants us to be? Well, we are going to welcome a third voice into our *Groundwork* conversation. After the break, Dr. John Witvliet, who is director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, will be joining us to explore how worship and social justice intersect, and also can reinforce one another. Stay tuned.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, we have been talking about the book of Amos, and how the prophet Amos critiques worship, especially in a culture which isn't living out its faith in practical ways; and yet, worship really is a significant part of the Christian life; so how do we bring those two things together?

DAVE BAST

Not only of the Christian life, but of the Bible. I mean, this is the same Old Testament that has all the prescriptions for sacrifice in Leviticus, for example; and then we get to Amos and God says: Get rid of it. It stinks. I hate it; all those offerings. Well, joining us is a colleague and friend, Dr. John Witvliet, who is director of the Calvin Institute of Worship. He is a person who thinks and writes and talks about worship all the time; and John, it is great to have your voice join our conversation about this subject. What about that seeming disconnect between the prescriptions for sacrifice and the rejections of them in the Old Testament?

JOHN WITVLIET

Thanks, Dave. Happy to be here today. Certainly throughout the history of the Church people have read those prophetic texts and said: Justice is important; worship is not; but then, gratefully in every generation there have been people who say: No, the full picture of scripture, and especially the Old Testament is both/and – both worship and justice. The prophets are very clear. God is not interested in our worship and prayer if it is disconnected. Hypocrisy is one of the main things we worry about, but you are so right; the Bible is so clear. All the beautiful texts of the Psalms, all those prescriptions for worship for the people of Israel; and for me, the Psalms are the place that hold it together.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, earlier in this program we talked about a young man who said: hey, I don't need worship; just give me social action. Get me out there and working with people. If you were to share a verse with him, what would you share to help him make the connection?

JOHN WITVLIET

It's a tough choice to pick a verse, but I would start with Psalm 147. It is a call to praise and it is so clear. It gives us this vision of God as the One who loves justice; and when Christians pursue justice, it is not simply done for the betterment of society; it is done to embody God's intention for the world; and what we believe Jesus has ushered in, the new, coming kingdom of God. So, to proclaim God loves justice, Psalm 147, the Lord builds up Jerusalem, gathers the outcasts, heals the brokenhearted, binds up their wounds; this loving

God who reaches out to the least – to the broken. Many other Psalm texts as well that...

DAVE BAST

Psalm 113 comes to my mind, all of a sudden: ³From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised. ^{7b}He lifts up the needy from the ash heap. That same juxtaposition of praise and care for the poor.

JOHN WITVLIET

And then other psalm texts right there in the hymn book, if you will, of the people are texts like Psalm 41: Blessed are those who love the poor. So, Israel at worship – at its best – was not only praising a God who loves justice, but they were also rehearsing how important it is for God's people to pursue justice.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, it sounds as if, if we separate worship and social justice, we really haven't understood the nature of worship – how it really brings us into the heart of God – how it really connects us into the way in which we live out our life in God.

JOHN WITVLIET

Absolutely right; and on top of that, we miss the sense that we are participating in the larger drama of God's redemptive plan for the world; and we also can quickly pursue justice in a way that ultimately is tiring. Worship is the enjoyment of God, is the enjoyment of God's presence; there is a Sabbath beauty, a quality of rest in it; and it assures us that our efforts are absolutely, vitally important; but we should also live as if the whole world depends on us and our efforts or our participation in those acts of justice will soon burn out. There is a burnout recipe there without our participation in worship.

DAVE BAST

So, one of the problems with worship, certainly the problem in Amos's day, was complacency on the part of the worshiper. They just didn't care, they thought if they offered the prescribed thing, even lavishly with music and all the rest, that that got them off the hook; but you are saying... you are kind of turning that around and saying that worship can actually revitalize us for the task that God calls us to do.

JOHN WITVLIET

Absolutely. It can revitalize us and it also, it is important to add, is an opportunity to practice justice. The other text I would choose would be a New Testament text, the text where Paul is writing about the Lord's Supper: 1 Corinthians 11, and he is critiquing injustices that are practiced at the Lord's Supper, and he challenges people: When you practice the Lord's Supper, do not distinguish rich and poor. Wait for each other. It is one of my favorite verses in the New Testament, this command to wait for each other...attend to each other at the Lord's Supper; and so there is a chance to practice just relationships in the context of a Christian congregation; and that is powerfully formative.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; sometimes I think that we have made worship, especially in the Protestant tradition, very individualistic. You know, it is me and Jesus; it is me and my God; it is quiet time; but worship as I see it from the Old Testament and the New...it is communal, it is social; and so it begins to spill over into the way we treat the person sitting next to us in the pew.

JOHN WITVLIET

The person sitting next to us, the people we pray for; we think about practices of worship that name and lift up people who are imprisoned; people who struggle with disabilities; problems of racism and poverty and hunger; all the time in public worship we are reinforcing certain attitudes, and we are forming a people – their imaginations, how they perceive the world, how we perceive the world – through how we form prayers, the way sermons are received, and the gestures we offer to each other. It is very important.

BOB HEERSPINK

So maybe one response when people say: I don't like to go to worship because it is all those people out there and I don't care for them and they are kind of boring and, you know, they are just not my kind of folks. Maybe the answer is to say: Well, that is exactly the way it is and that is why you need to be there to connect with these fellow Christians and learn what it means to live in community with people different than yourself.

JOHN WITVLIET

Yes, going to church is a good chance to practice hanging out with people we wouldn't otherwise like, it has been said.

DAVE BAST

Yes; right. It should be anyway; but Bob, I was just thinking now as you were sharing, you know, for most of us, let's be honest, in our tradition, not only as Protestants, but the Reformed tradition with our great valuing of the word; for us worship pretty much hangs on the quality of the sermon – how good is the preacher – and if it is not good enough, let's look elsewhere. It strikes me that that is not the first place, maybe, we should look when we ask about worship that is transformative. I hesitate to even say that because I am a preacher myself with that strong conviction that the word is what does it; but there must be practices, specific things we do... You mentioned the Lord's Supper... That is a really leveling act; when we come together around the table we are all sinners, and none of us is higher or lower. What are some other practices, maybe, that would be transformative, or make our worship more likely to be transformative of us?

JOHN WITVLIET

Well, the Lord's Supper certainly comes to mind as the lead example, and it is not just in the themes that are emphasized there, but it is the gestures, it is the way we practice the Lord's Supper; it is the intentionality around understanding that we participate in this in union with people right across town who are celebrating the Lord's Supper in a nursing home or a prison. So, there is an active imagination that comes with the Lord's Supper that is important; but it is beyond that; I would point to aspects of worship like prayers of confession – an active congregation confessing sins of racism or inaction with respect to issues around poverty or persons with disabilities, or confessing that we too often lift up the rich and famous in an unjust way that leads us *not* to regard those who are lowly. The Bible tells us that is important. Those acts of confession...

DAVE BAST

Confessing celebrity worship.

JOHN WITVLIET

Confessing celebrity worship...confessing that in our worship we sometimes are too celebrity driven. That is a powerful practice, and sometimes it takes the celebrities that lead us to lead us in that prayer, but that is very important. Prayers of petition, another. A simple gesture is the passing of the peace. My pastor some weeks ago said: When you pass the peace, when you reach out your hand to greet another brother and sister in the context of worship, you are practicing the way that you should greet people all week long – offering them the peace of Christ in that beautiful little sentence frame that moment in worship; and he said: you know what we do here is to form an imagination so that we practice a new way of life – a New Testament way of life – to carry with us all week long.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, worship is not something that we can put in a box; it is not something we do Sunday morning, and some of us Sunday night. It really is a pattern that we take with us on Monday morning and throughout the coming week.

JOHN WITVLIET

Absolutely; it is like seeing the whole Christian life in condensed form intensified during that hour. All week long we might have thoughts of praise – little thoughts as we are driving around town that express a prayer to God for help or confession. Well, that is brought into intense focus when we do it together.

BOB HEERSPINK

And as we worship, one of the things that we stress is that we are coming before God, and that sense of being before God's face that spills out now into the coming week, so that the way in which we behave with our colleague at work, or the kind of language we use toward people that we might think beneath us; all those actions now become lived before God and they take on a whole different quality.

JOHN WITVLIET

And it is the very best way to participate in what we sometimes think are explicit acts of promoting justice. If we are gathering signatures for a petition or participating in a march or sending letters to leaders in the political realm, all of those acts of justice take on new meaning and significance when we do them before God's face, and understand ourselves to be participating in something that God is bringing about through the power of the cross, and not something that we are simply doing on our own on our own strength and power.

DAVE BAST

I was struck by a phrase you used a few moments ago: to form an imagination...the function of worship in doing that in us – in us as individuals and maybe as a body. I wonder if you could just say a little more about that.

JOHN WITVLIET

Well, all week long our culture teaches us to imagine that celebrity is most important, or that riches are most important; that what we think of as what is high and lifted up is in fact high and lifted up; and we come to worship and we hear a very different message: God loves the lowly. The world is turned upside down. Sometimes the least important things by the world's standards become the most important things in God's way of doing things. Well, that is a pretty profound countercultural move, and it needs to be rehearsed and challenged by the kinds of texts and stories and themes that are rehearsed in worship. That is why preaching is still pretty important, and I am glad you love preaching, even while wanting to expand the conversation beyond it.

DAVE BAST

Well, and maybe part of the imagination could be me imagining myself to be a more just person, and then trying to live into that.

BOB HEERSPINK

Knowing who you are in Christ and then living it out.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

It really strikes me that Amos is saying: hey, worship is empty without justice; but it would seem to me that we don't have much energy for justice; even though people will talk about we need a just society. The real energy that drives us to live out that conviction is going to be found in our worship and our relationship with God.

JOHN WITVLIET

Absolutely; the energy and a clear sense of the direction to pursue – to discern which ways to promote justice – and to discern which causes are especially important to pursue. If we are left to simply discern that on our

own, it is a problem.

DAVE BAST

Dr. John Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Worship, thank you for being with us.

JOHN WITVLIET

Happy to.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thank you, John. When we come back, we will wrap up with some final thoughts about worship and justice.
Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, we have been talking about the connection between worship and justice, and we have had this wonderful conversation with John Witvliet that really drove home to me the point that worship needs to be transformative. It is not enough just to help me express my feelings, even if I sincerely mean that, my feelings toward God, but somehow it has to be God working in me to change me as I go out and live in the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

That was my take-away from the conversation. When it comes to living as justice people, the worship service really is meant to change us – to make us more Christlike...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Sure, it expresses our emotional joy and happiness, and sometimes our lament about our sin and about the brokenness of life; but as we leave, we are now prepared to give our *spiritual* worship in the way we live Monday through Saturday.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, that word *change*, all these arguments that people have been having and churches have been struggling with worship, and it is always over changing the worship. Instead of focusing on maybe the more important question: Is the worship changing us? Is it changing me and making me more into the kind of person who lives out the values of the kingdom of God, who expresses and works for that shalom that we long for – the wholeness and the flourishing of our society?

BOB HEERSPINK

And I need worship; I need worship on a weekly basis with God's people to energize me for the challenge to live as God's person in the world. To me, that is a critical factor. We just need to be into worship if we are really going to be into justice.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation; and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you have been hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/justice-worship>

Printed on July 31, 2025