

RTM

reaching/teaching/ministering curriculum

October 26, 2008
When Holy Turns Hollow
Isaiah 1:10-18



MINISTERING HELPS

Group Prayer

After taking prayer requests, but BEFORE actually praying for them, ask your group the following questions...

- **Why do we take prayer requests each week?**
- **Why don't we just take these names down and pray for them at home rather than together?**
- **Does prayer really make a difference?**

The questions are not meant to cause doubts, but help people break out and remember the benefits of praying together.

Stay Connected

Instead of focusing on lots of absentees, maybe this week everyone could focus on the name of a person or couple who is out of fellowship with the group. How could your whole group bombard them with love this week?

REACHING HELPS

If your class...

- uses the green sheets faithfully...
- is praying for God to open doors of opportunity with folks who could be members of your class...
- plans fellowships outside of class where bringing a prospective member is encouraged and expected
- understands that every member is on the outreach team...

...then you will probably see guests on a regular basis.

This might be a great week to go over how to treat a guest with the class. Mention things like...

- Making sure members arrive early so that an eager guest doesn't arrive to an empty room
- Making sure that when a guest arrives, members move toward them with a warm welcome and not stay seated to look them over (even if the lesson has started, this is important)
- Having someone assigned to follow up on them after class or take them to lunch.

TEACHING HELPS

Today, Pastor Chad begins a series of sermons looking at PRAYER.

It is a wonderful correlation that we will begin this series on a Sunday where we take the Lord's Supper together.

Prayer and the Lord's Supper have something in common. Both are things that we should do on a regular basis. But like many things we begin to do that have meaning, if we aren't careful, we can ritualize them into something that is empty and meaningless.

Use today's lesson to help your group reignite their passion for not only prayer, but the Lord's Supper and everything we do as an act of worship of our awesome God.

When Holy Turns Hollow

Isaiah 1:10-18



Recently I was with my teenager on an errand and he was driving his vehicle. As we parked in the parking lot, he asked me to place his iPod in the glove compartment. It occurs to me that several things are wrong with this moment in time...

- 1) My son has never worn gloves while driving.
- 2) There has probably never been a pair of gloves ever placed in the box where he was wanting me to place the iPod.
- 3) How can so many papers and junk fit into such a small box, and how am I going to even fit this iPod in it?

These things I am pondering cause me to ask, “Why would he call it a glove compartment?” In fact, I also have never worn gloves to drive and have never placed anyone’s gloves in this compartment, and yet I have always called this a glove compartment.

It turns out that my exploration of this mystery led me to understand that in the early days of automobiles, people in fact did wear gloves to drive them. The open air design of the cab often made the inside dusty and sometimes damp so gloves were worn for a better and safer grip. A place was needed to store your gloves and keep them dry, and so this compartment was created for that very purpose.

Over the last 60 years, cabs have been covered, windows installed and air conditioners created so that gloves are not an important part of driving gear. Even so, my grandfather’s name for the box was passed to my father, then to me and now to my son.

It’s funny to me how in the process of updating and innovating, a name like “glove compartment” has escaped the renaming process and has endured through all these years. The box definitely gets used, and most new vehicles have added lots of boxes throughout the vehicle for storing our junk. But as for the original intent and purpose of that box placed under the dashboard, we abandoned that many years ago.

Spiritual activities can be much like the glove compartment. There are many spiritual activities that we are encouraged to do in scripture so that we might connect fully with God and become a fully developing follower of Christ. Yet, the longer we are in relationship with Christ, the more vulnerable we can be in forgetting why they are important. Sometime we keep doing them because that’s what we are supposed to do. But when they stop actually accomplishing the spiritual intent that God created them to have, then they are not much more than empty ritual. The HOLY has become HOLLOW, and God has never been a big fan of hollow ritualism.

Today’s passage helps us see God’s disdain for hollow rituals and leads us to evaluate what we are doing to connect with God that we might identify any hollowness that might be there.

Teaching Points

Introduction...

1. Use the illustration of the glove compartment to show how we can continue to do something because that’s the way we always have, not because it has any meaning for us. Can your group think of other things that would fit into that category of behavior? Maybe things like...
 - Ice box (was called that cause blocks of ice were placed in them to keep things refrigerated)
 - the trunk of you car (is called that because in the old days an actual trunk was strapped on the back end of the vehicle)
 - Baseball caps worn by players who play in indoor stadiums
2. Ask members if people ever do “spiritual” things that really don’t have meaning or ask if they find themselves “going through the motions” of something religious, but they really don’t put their heart into it. What are some of those things? Is it better to do something religious and not mean it or to do nothing at all?

Explain that today’s lesson takes a look at a time in the life of God’s people where the HOLY had become HOLLOW and what God said about it.

1. How much does God dislike it when the holy becomes hollow? (v10)

¹⁰Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah!
Isaiah 1:10

Isaiah was a prophet during the time when the original nation of Israel had been divided into two kingdoms — Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. The northern kingdom had sinned greatly against God, and the southern kingdom was headed in the same direction — perverting justice, oppressing the poor, turning from God to idols, and looking for military aid from pagan nations rather than from God. Isaiah came primarily as a prophet to Judah, but his message was also for the northern kingdom. Sometimes "Israel" refers to both kingdoms. Isaiah lived to see the destruction and captivity of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.

Sodom and Gomorrah were two cities that God completely destroyed for their great wickedness ([Genesis 19:1-25](#)). They are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible as examples of God's judgment against sin ([Jeremiah 50:40](#); [Ezekiel 16:46-63](#); [Matthew 11:23,24](#); [Jude 7](#)). Isaiah compared the rulers and people of Judah to the rulers and people of Sodom and Gomorrah. To hear what God wanted to say, the people had to listen and be willing to obey. When we can't hear God's message, perhaps we are not listening carefully or we are not truly willing to do what he says.

—Life Application Bible Notes

Many people want to think of Sodom and Gomorrah as a place where God proved how much he hated homosexuality, but there was much more to God's judgment than that. Note what God said about Sodom in Ezekiel 16...

⁴⁹Sodom's sins were pride, gluttony, and laziness, while the poor and needy suffered outside her door. ⁵⁰She was proud and committed detestable sins, so I wiped her out, as you have seen.

Ezekiel 16:49-50 (NLT)

Isn't it interesting that while we know homosexuality is a sin, it didn't even make the list of things God mentioned were the reason for its destruction. God, through Isaiah, was letting His people know that their current spiritual condition was at a level that compared to one of the wickedest places ever known. Just taking a look at how God speaks here lets us know that God seriously dislikes it when the holy becomes hollow.

2. Specific empty practices where the Holy had become hollow. (v11-14)

¹¹"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. ¹²When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? ¹³Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies. ¹⁴Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

Isaiah 1:11-14

God was unhappy with their sacrifices, but he was not revoking the system of sacrifices he had initiated with Moses. Instead, God was calling for sincere faith and devotion. The leaders were carefully making the traditional sacrifices and offerings at holy celebrations, but they were still unfaithful to God in their hearts. Sacrifices were to be an outward sign of

1. How much does God dislike the HOLY becoming HOLLOW... (v10).

- Have someone read the entire passage (v.10-18)
- Ask your group what they remember about the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ask them, "What was the reason God destroyed it?" Probably they will say homosexuality and sensuality. Point them over to Ezekiel 16:49-50 and hear why God said He destroyed it. Were homosexuality and sensuality even mentioned specifically here? What was mentioned?
- God equated His people with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in verse 10. What does that say to us about how God feels about the Holy becoming hollow?

their inward faith in God, but the outward signs became empty because no inward faith existed. Why, then, did they continue to offer sacrifices? Like many people today, they had come to place more faith in the rituals of their religion than in the God they worshiped. Examine your own religious practices: do they spring from your faith in the living God? God does not take pleasure in our outward expressions if our inward faith is missing (see [Deuteronomy 10:12-16](#); [1 Samuel 15:22,23](#); [Psalm 51:16-19](#); [Hosea 6:6](#)).

"New Moons" and "Sabbaths" refer to monthly offerings ([Numbers 28:11-14](#)) and weekly and special annual Sabbaths on the Day of Atonement and Feast of Tabernacles ([Leviticus 16:31,23-34,39](#)). For all the feasts, see the chart in [Leviticus 23](#). Although the people did not feel sorry for their sins, they continued to offer sacrifices for forgiveness. Gifts and sacrifices mean nothing to God when they come from someone with a corrupt heart. God wants us to love him, trust him, and turn from our sin; after that, he will be pleased with our "sacrifices" of time, money, or service.
—Life Application Bible Notes

2. Specific empty practices where the Holy had become hollow... (v11-14)

- Discuss the five types of sacrifices that the Jewish people were called on to make using the yellow commentary section from Leviticus 1-7. Make sure to include the following idea...

The sacrificial system taught the necessity of dealing with sin and, at the same time, demonstrated that God had provided a way for dealing with sin.

- What did God say about their sacrifices? What did God say about the offerings? What did God say about their incense? What did God say about their festivals? Didn't God initiate all this and tell the people to do it? Why then would He be so down on it?

[Leviticus 1-7](#) gives the most detailed description of Israel's sacrificial system, including five types of sacrifices. The sacrifices and offerings that were brought by the people were to be the physical expression of their inward devotion.

1. **Burnt offering** (*olah*). The burnt offering was offered both in the morning and in the evening, as well as on special days such as the Sabbath, the new moon, and the yearly feasts ([Num. 28-29](#); [2 Kings 16:15](#); [2 Chron. 2:4](#); [31:3](#); [Ezra 3:3-6](#)). Rituals performed after childbirth ([Lev. 12:6-8](#)), for an unclean discharge ([Lev. 15:14-15](#)) or hemorrhage ([Lev. 15:29-30](#)), or after a person who was keeping a Nazirite vow was defiled ([Num. 6:10-11](#)) required a burnt offering, as well as a sin offering. The animal for this sacrifice could be a young bull, lamb, goat, turtledove, or young pigeon; but it had to be a perfect and complete specimen.

2. **Grain offering** (*minchah*; "meat offering" in KJV). An offering from the harvest of the land is the only type that required no bloodshed. It was composed of fine flour mixed with oil and frankincense. Sometimes, this offering was cooked into cakes prior to taking it to the priest. These cakes, however, had to be made without leaven.

3. **Peace offering** (*zabach shelamin*; well-being in NRSV; "shared" in REB; "fellowship" in NIV). This consisted of the sacrifice of a bull, cow, lamb, or goat that had no defect. As with the burnt offering, the individual laid a hand on the animal and killed it. The idea of thanksgiving was associated with the peace offering. It often accompanied other sacrifices in celebration of events such as the dedication of the Temple ([1 Kings 8:63](#)) or spiritual renewal ([2 Chron. 29:31-36](#)).

4. **Sin offering** (*chatta't*; "purification" in REB). This was designed to deal with sin that was committed unintentionally. The sacrifice varied according to who committed the sin.

5. **Guilt offering** (*'asham*, trespass in KJV; reparation in REB). This is hard to distinguish from the sin offering ([Lev. 4-5](#)). In [Leviticus 5:6-7](#), the guilt offering is called the sin offering. Both offerings also were made for similar types of sin. The guilt offering was concerned supremely with restitution.

The burnt, grain, peace, sin, and guilt offering composed the basic sacrificial system of Israel. These sacrifices were commonly used in conjunction with each other and were carried out on both an individual and a corporate basis. The sacrificial system taught the necessity of dealing with sin and, at the same time, demonstrated that God had provided a way for dealing with sin.

—Holman Bible Dictionary

3. *The anatomy of hollow praying. (v15-17)*

¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, ¹⁷ learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. *Isaiah 1:15-17*

Prayer is how we connect heart to heart with our heavenly father. Throughout the Bible, we see time and time again that God pursues a heart to heart relationship with humanity. But in the Bible and in human history, we see time and time again where prayer becomes hollow, empty and void of its intended purpose. This was one of those times.

From this passage, we can assume that the praying that was going on was probably only the praying that was happening in public venues such as the temple worship and the festivals. We can also see that this was not a “moment of silence” but public praying where effort was given to raising hands and other public displays.

As with the sacrifices and the festivals, when they are empty, God is not impressed. In fact, in verse 15, the Lord says that when it is going on He hides His eyes from it and plugs His ears as well.

When Isaiah had a true prayerful encounter with the Lord (see Isaiah 6), he couldn't leave the same. It changed him as he got a better glimpse of who God was and who he was. God became bigger, more holy and more awesome to him; and in correlation to that, he realized how sinful and messed up he was.

This was not what was happening in the prayer life of God's people here. They were praying yet their hands were full of blood, probably not real blood but a symbol of the hatred, disdain and disregard they had for their neighbors and people in their society (similar to how Jesus said murder is not when you kill, but starts with the anger in your heart that makes you want to kill in Matthew 5:21-22). In prayer they were not seeking to have their sins removed and forgiven, but they were bringing all their sins with them into their prayer time and expecting God to accept them though they had no desire to change.

God was saying to His people, and He says to us, that real communication and communion with God results in a life that doesn't hold on to sin and self interests. It results in a life where we are changing from being self interested into being interested in the things of God and in the affairs of others. That is what God meant when He said, “stop doing wrong... see justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the fatherless and plead for the widow.” When prayer is all about us, God is repulsed. When pray is about becoming centered on God and on others, God is engaged and active in it.

3. The anatomy of hollow praying... (v 15-17)

- Ask your group, “What is prayer and what is its purpose?”
- Help group members understand that it wasn't an absence of prayer that was repulsing God, it was that what was being offered up was empty and hollow of its intended purpose.
- Is prayer supposed to change God or us? Was there any change taking place in the Jewish people who were praying in Isaiah's day?
- How should we pray in a way where we can see change? What will prayers centered on us result in? What will prayers centered on God and others result in?

4. Let God fix the hollowness... (v18)

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 as crimson, they shall be like wool."

Isaiah 1:10-18 (NIV)

God then invited the sinful people to come to their senses ([Isa. 1:18](#)) and admit they had been wrong in their attitudes and practices. The invitation **Come now, let us reason together** was more than a call for negotiations between the people and God. The word "reason" (*yākaḥ*) is a law term used of arguing,

EXHORTATIONS TO REPENTANCE. 1:16-20

Not only feel sorrow for the sin committed, but break off the practice. We must be doing, not stand idle. We must be doing the good the Lord our God requires. It is plain that the sacrifices of the law could not atone, even for outward national crimes. But, blessed be God, there is a Fountain opened, in which sinners of every age and rank may be cleansed. Though our sins have been as scarlet and crimson, a deep dye, a double dye, first in the wool of original corruption, and afterwards in the many threads of actual transgression; though we have often dipped into sin, by many backslidings; yet pardoning mercy will take out the stain, [Ps 51:7](#). They should have all the happiness and comfort they could desire. Life and death, good and evil, are set before us. O Lord, incline all of us to live to thy glory. —Matthew Henry

3. Let God fix the hollowness... (v18)

- God loves us too much to let us continue in something that will not benefit us, especially when it comes to our relationship with Him. What do you think God meant when He said, let's reason together? Is this like a compromise or is it more than that?
- God basically says here that empty religious activity and making the Holy hollow is SIN. How bad is this sin? Is it just a little stain? Use the EXHORTATIONS TO REPENTANCE commentary to describe the deep double dye that the scarlet and crimson represent.
- What is God's promise for anyone who will come to Him and confess their sin of hollowing the Holy? How does 1 John 1:6-9 let us know that God is still willing to do that if we find ourselves going through the motions spiritually?

*convincing, or deciding a case in court. The people were to be convinced by their argumentation with God that He was right and they were wrong about their condition. (Other court terms in this chapter are **justice... defend, and plead, v. 17.**) If they acknowledged the depth of their sins—that their iniquities were like blood-colored stains on their souls (**scarlet**, a red dye made from a worm, and **crimson**, red-colored cloth)—then God in His grace would cleanse them, making them spiritually **white** like **snow** or **wool**. Acknowledgment of sin was to precede God's cleansing. And the same is true today.—Bible Knowledge Commentary*

Scarlet, or crimson, was the color of a deep-red permanent dye, and its deep stain was virtually impossible to remove from clothing. The bloodstained hands of the murderers are probably in view here (see [Isa 1:15,21](#)). The stain of sin seems equally permanent, but God can remove sin's stain from our lives as he promised to do for the Israelites. We don't have to go through life permanently soiled. God's Word assures us that if we are willing and obedient, Christ will forgive

and remove our most indelible stains ([Psalm 51:1-7](#)). —Life Application Bible Notes

God's faithfulness to let His people know when things are not right in His sight is always in harmony with His desire and ability to get us back on track.

Just as the Jewish people of Isaiah's day fell into a practice of empty ritualism, so can we. Just as God was repulsed by their hollow religious activity, so is He repulsed by ours. And thankfully just as God called them to come back into a fellowship with Him that was full and abundant, so too He gives us that call.

⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:6-9 (NIV)

Points for Application

- Both individually and corporately, what are ways we have ritualized our relationship with God and made the Holy things hollow?
- Do you think our prayer life is a key area in understanding if our spiritual practices are hollow and just going through the motions? Why or why not?
- What would cause us to get to the place where we just go through the motions spiritually?
- If someone really wanted to get past empty ritualism with God, what would they need to do? What would they need to say to God? How would they need to say it? What should they do to get the passion for God back into their spiritual walk?

References....

The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament Ed., John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Victor Books, Wheaton, IL: 1985.

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Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible [Volume Index], Matthew Henry. Rights: Public Domain

The Life Application Study Bible, Tyndale Publishers.