

# Worship *the* Creator



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Ps. 115:1–8, Deut. 10:17–22, Ps. 101:1, Isa. 1:10–17, Isaiah 58, Mark 12:38–40.*

**Memory Text:** “‘Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?’” (*Isaiah 58:6, 7, NKJV*).

Even a quick reading of the Old Testament prophets alerts us to their concerns about the mistreatment of the poor and oppressed. The prophets and the God for whom they spoke were outraged about what they saw being done in all the surrounding nations (*see, for example, Amos 1 and 2*). But they also had a particular sense of anger and grief at the acts of iniquity done by God's people themselves, those who had been the recipients of so many divine blessings. Given their history, as well as their God-given laws, these people should have known better. Unfortunately, that wasn't always the case, and prophets had a lot to say about this sad state of events.

It is interesting to discover, too, that many of the best-known statements concerning justice and injustice from the Old Testament prophets are actually given in the context of instructions about worship. As we will see, true worship is not just something that happens during a religious ritual. True worship also is about living a life that shares God's concerns for the well-being of others and that seeks to lift up those who have been downtrodden and forgotten.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 10.

## Idolatry and Oppression

Soon after God led the people of Israel out of Egypt, He met with them at Mount Sinai, giving them the Ten Commandments in written form, including the first two commandments about not worshipping other gods and not making idols (*see Exod. 20:2–6*). In response, the people promised to do everything they had been commanded and to live as His people (*see Exod. 24:1–13*).

But then Moses was gone up the mountain and stayed there for almost six weeks and the people began to wonder what had become of him. Under pressure from the mob, Aaron made a golden calf and led the people in making sacrifices before it, after which “they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry” (*Exod. 32:6, NIV*). Both the Lord and Moses were outraged at how quickly the people had turned away from God to idol worship—and it seemed that it was only Moses’ intercession that saved Israel from its deserved punishment (*see Exod. 32:30–34*).

Idolatry, however, was a temptation God’s people fell into way too often. The history of the kings of Israel and Judah is punctuated by periods of idolatry, which include the outrageous acts some of the kings led their people to commit in the worship of these gods. Such unfaithfulness was a recurring focus of the prophets God sent in order to call the people back to Him. Often, too, amid the calls for revival and reformation were calls for better treatment of the poor, the needy, and the helpless among them.

**Read** Psalm 115:1–8. What crucial point is the author making there?

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It is a human tendency that we become like the thing or person we worship and focus on. So, it was only natural that concern for others and for justice would diminish when God’s people turned from worshipping a God of justice to worshipping the false gods of the surrounding nations, who were often styled as beings of war or fertility. When they chose other gods, the people changed their attitude in a lot of things, including how they treated others. Had they been faithful to the Lord, they would have shared His concern for those in need among them.

**Dwell more on this idea of becoming like what we worship. How do we see contemporary manifestations of this principle?**

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## A Reason to Worship

Throughout the Bible, God's people are urged to worship God, but we also are repeatedly offered reasons for doing so. We are told to worship Him because of who He is, what He has done, and because of His many attributes. Among these are His goodness, justice, and mercy. When we are reminded of what God is like, what He has done for us (especially in the cross of Christ), and what He promises to do, none of us should ever be without reason to worship and praise God.

**Read Deuteronomy 10:17–22, Psalm 101:1, 146:5–10, Isaiah 5:16, and 61:11. What are the motivations for worship and praising God given in these verses?**

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Such reasons for worship were not new to God's people. Some of the most enthusiastic times of worship of the newly freed Israelites happened in response to the obvious intervention of God on their behalf. For example, after being brought out of Egypt and crossing the Red Sea, Moses and Miriam led the people in singing praise to God for what they had just seen and been rescued from (*see Exodus 15*).

God's justice and mercy, as revealed in such events, were not to be forgotten. As the people kept these stories alive by retelling them regularly, the acts and justice of God continued to be an inspiration for their worship years later and in following generations. One example of this retelling and worship is recorded in Deuteronomy 10:17–22.

God's justice is, first, simply part of who He is, a core component of His essential character. "It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice" (*Job 34:12, NIV*). God is just and is concerned with justice—and that is a reason to worship and praise Him.

Second, God's justice is seen in His just and righteous acts on behalf of His people and on behalf of all who are poor and oppressed. His justice is never merely a description of His character. Rather, the Bible portrays a God who "heard the cry of the needy" (*Job 34:28, NIV*) and is active and anxious to right the wrongs that are so obvious in our world. Ultimately, this will be fully realized in God's final judgment and His re-creation of the world.

**If ancient Israel had reason to praise the Lord, how much more so do we, after the Cross, have reasons to praise Him?**

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## Religious Oppressors

During the better times of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the people would return to the temple and the worship of God, although even then, their worship was often mixed with inroads from idolatry and the religions of the surrounding nations. But according to the prophets, even their best attempts at religion were not enough to turn them from the evils perpetrated in the land in their daily lives. And no matter how hard they worked at being religious through their rituals of worship, the music of their hymns could not drown out the cries of the poor and oppressed.

Amos described the people of his day as those who “trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land” (*Amos 8:4, NIV*). He saw their desire to get done with their rituals so they could reopen the market and get back to their dishonest trade, that of “buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals” (*Amos 8:6, NIV*).

**Read** Isaiah 1:10–17, Amos 5:21–24, and Micah 6:6–8. What was the Lord telling these religious people about their rituals?

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Through His prophets, God uses strong language to ridicule religion and worship that is disconnected from and in contrast with the suffering and oppression of those around them. In Amos 5:21–24 (*NIV*), we read of God saying that He “hates,” “despises,” and is generally disgusted by their worship. Their gatherings are described as a “stench,” and their offerings and music are dismissed as less than worthless.

In Micah 6, we see a series of increasingly inflated, even mocking, suggestions as to how they can most appropriately worship God. The prophet mockingly offers the suggestion of burnt offerings, then increases the offering to “thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil” (*Mic. 6:7, NIV*) before going to the horrific—but not unknown—extreme of suggesting sacrificing his firstborn child to gain God’s favor and forgiveness.

In the end, though, what the Lord truly wanted for them was to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [their] God” (*Mic. 6:8, NIV*).

**Have you ever found yourself guilty of being more concerned about religious forms and rituals than about helping those in need right around you? What did you learn from that experience?**

## A Way to Worship

In their explanation of the relationship between worship and justice, there is another step urged by the prophets: that an active concern for relieving the poor and oppressed and helping those in need *is* an important part of worship itself. Isaiah 58 is one chapter that makes this link obvious.

**Read** Isaiah 58. What has gone wrong in the relationship between God and His people as described in the early part of this chapter?

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As we have seen previously, this criticism is addressed to people who are actively religious. They seem to be earnestly seeking God, but apparently it is not working. So, God says they should try changing how they worship, to try a different way of serving God. If He were to choose how they would worship, it would be “to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke” (*Isa. 58:6, NIV*). They also would feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, and help those in need.

Such activities are not presented as the only way to worship, but God does urge them as a way to worship—and a form of worship that might be preferable to some of the people’s more traditional worship practices. As such, worship is not only inwardly focused but something that brings blessing to all those around the worshipers of God. “The true purpose of religion is to release men from their burdens of sin, to eliminate intolerance and oppression, and to promote justice, liberty, and peace.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 306.

In Isaiah 58:8–12, God promises blessings in response to this form of worship. In effect, God is saying that if the people were to be less focused on themselves, they would find God working with them and through them to bring healing and restoration.

Interestingly, this chapter also connects this kind of worship with a renewal of “delight”-filled Sabbath keeping. We have already considered some of the strong connections between Sabbath and ministry, but these verses include both these activities in this call for the people to revitalize their worship and to discover God’s blessing. Reflecting on these verses, Ellen G. White commented, “Upon those who keep the Sabbath of the Lord is laid the responsibility of doing a work of mercy and benevolence.”—*Welfare Ministry*, p. 121.

## Mercy and Faithfulness

When Jesus was confronted by some of the religious leaders of His day who criticized Him for eating with “sinners,” He quoted the prophet Hosea, telling them to go back to their books and discover what God really meant when He said, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (*Matt. 9:13, NIV, quoting Hos. 6:6*).

As we will see, Jesus lived a life of caring and service. His interactions with others, His healing miracles, and many of His parables demonstrated and urged that a life lived in such a way was the best way to express true devotion to God. The religious leaders were His greatest critics but also were the target of His harshest criticism. Like the religious people of Isaiah’s day, they believed that they ensured their special relationship with God because of their religious practices, while at the same time they were exploiting the poor and ignoring the needy. Their worship was out of step with their actions, and Jesus was not reserved in His condemnation of such hypocrisy.

**Read** Mark 12:38–40. Does Jesus’ comment that they “devour widows’ houses” seem out of place in this list, or is that the point Jesus is trying to make? How would you explain why “these shall receive greater damnation”?

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Perhaps Jesus’ most frightening sermon—particularly for religious people—is that found in Matthew 23. Not only did Jesus describe their religion as not helping people who are disadvantaged in life, He considered such religion as adding to their burdens. By their actions or at times their lack of action and caring, Jesus said, they “ ‘shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces’ ” (*Matt. 23:13, NIV*).

But echoing the prophets of centuries earlier, Jesus also directly addressed the gap between their serious religious practices and the injustices they condoned and profited from. “ ‘Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness’ ” (*Matt. 23:23, NIV*). Jesus was quick to add that the religious practices and observances are not wrong in themselves, but they should not take the place of treating others fairly.

**How can we avoid the trap of thinking that having and knowing the truth is enough?**

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**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “Isaiah 58—A Divine Prescription,” pp. 29–34, in *Welfare Ministry*; “Woes on the Pharisees,” pp. 610–620, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“In urging the value of practical godliness, the prophet was only repeating the counsel given Israel centuries before. . . . From age to age these counsels were repeated by the servants of Jehovah to those who were in danger of falling into habits of formalism and of forgetting to show mercy.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 326, 327.

“I have been instructed to refer our people to the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah. Read this chapter carefully and understand the kind of ministry that will bring life into the churches. The work of the gospel is to be carried by means of our liberality as well as by our labors. When you meet suffering souls who need help, give it to them. When you find those who are hungry, feed them. In doing this you will be working in lines of Christ’s ministry. The Master’s holy work was a benevolent work. Let our people everywhere be encouraged to have a part in it.”—Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, p. 29.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Have you ever thought about doing justice and loving mercy as acts of worship? How might this change your approach to caring for others? How might this change your approach to worship?
- 2 How can we guard against neglecting the “more important matters of the law” (*Matt. 23:23, NIV*) in our Christian lives, both individually and as a church community? Can you recognize some examples in your own experience where you might have strained out a gnat but swallowed a camel (*see Matt. 23:24, NIV*)?
- 3 Why is hypocrisy considered such a sin? Isn’t it better at least to try to look like we are doing good?
- 4 How does God’s vision and passion for the poor and needy, as expressed through the prophets, change how you view the world? How might you read or hear your local news reports in a different way if you saw and heard with the eyes and ears of a prophet?

**Summary:** While the prophets were concerned about evil in the land, they were particularly focused on the evil committed by people who claimed and worshiped God as their own. For the prophets and for Jesus, worship is inconsistent with injustice, and such religion is hypocrisy. The real worship that God seeks includes working against oppression and caring for the poor and needy.

## Dreams of Jesus

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Susumu Kanai had his first vision of Jesus as he lay in bed at 5:00 A.M. in Osaka, Japan. He had spent some time contemplating life every morning for 12 years in his hometown of 2.6 million people, located 310 miles (500 kilometers) southwest of Tokyo. But this time, he was startled to see a bright light. In the light, he saw a back-lit figure with outstretched arms.

Curious to know more, Susumu searched online and found a photo of the giant *Christ the Redeemer* statue with outstretched arms in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He concluded that perhaps he had seen Jesus.

A short time later, Susumu had a nighttime dream in which he was seated across from a Man at a table. The Man had His hands on the table and was surrounded by a bright rainbow. When he visited a barbershop several days later, Susumu realized that the Man in the dream was Jesus. Leafing through a book of famous paintings as he waited for a haircut, he saw Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and recognized Jesus from the dream. The dreams and visions continued. Susumu had a dream that he and seven other men had been captured in a foreign country. He watched as the seven men were killed one by one. When his turn came to die, someone grabbed him from behind and whispered, "I'm of the Coptic religion. Come with me."

Susumu woke at that moment. He looked up "Coptic" online and was astonished to find a Coptic church located only 35 miles (55 kilometers) away. For the first time he wondered whether he should go to church.

A few mornings later, Susumu had another vision. He saw the words "Gospel of Matthew" run across his mind's eye from left to right, like a digital advertisement. He didn't know what the words meant; so, he looked online and learned that Matthew was a book of the Bible. He immediately downloaded an audio version of Matthew and started listening in his car.

At the same time, he asked his landlady, whom he knew was a Christian, where she worshipped. She brought him to the Osaka Center Seventh-day Adventist Church.



*Susumu, pictured left, is among dozens of unsolicited guests who showed up at unprecedented evangelistic meetings at 161 sites across Japan in 2018. Church leaders have never seen anything like it in a country where Christians account for only 0.7 percent of the population. "The Holy Spirit is doing something extraordinary in Japan, bringing people to the church and convicting them," said Adventist Church president Ted N. C. Wilson, who met Susumu. "We need to pray for the latter rain of the Holy Spirit so countries like Japan and many others become completely inundated with the Advent message."*



## ***Part I: Overview***

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It would stand to reason that those who worship a God of justice, righteousness, and mercy would practice these virtues. But that is not always the case with God's people. True worship should not be inconsistent with the character of the One being worshiped.

In this lesson, we note that when God's people turned to idol worship their concern for others was lost. We are encouraged to consider seriously the fact that worship of Jehovah includes a covenant relationship in which He works through His followers to demonstrate His values, among which are mercy and selfless service for the oppressed. We are reminded that religious sacrifice and routine, as well as heartless and meaningless offerings, are no substitute for mercy and justice toward those less fortunate. Furthermore, in studying the message in Isaiah 58, we learn that God defines the true fast as selfless service to "loose the chains of injustice," feed the hungry, provide shelter to the homeless, and clothe the naked. He will not hear prayers that arise from self-centered worship. He will not approve of His people dragging self-centered worship into the Sabbath. Looking at His example, we become aware of Jesus' ultimate concern that the worship of His followers will result in a passion for meeting the needs of others.

### **Teacher's Aim:**

Explore with your class the meaning of "worship integrity," which suggests that our lives must match what we know in order to be true to God. Thus, we must worship in spirit and in truth.

## ***Part II: Commentary***

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**Illustration:** Hurricane Irene struck the Caribbean and the East Coast of the United States with fury in late August 2011. After Irene left a path of destruction in the state of New Jersey, members of a nearby Seventh-day Adventist Church distributed relief goods for two days to the victims in their neighborhood. Who in your neighborhood needs your help? In the story of the good Samaritan, how does Jesus answer the question: Who is my neighbor (*Luke 10:25–37*)? It has been said that our neighbor is anyone in our sphere who needs our help. What can your church do to meet the needs of the people in your neighborhood? How does serving the needs of others help to deepen our worship experience with our Creator?

**Scripture:** In *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus*, Dwight Nelson explains that Isaiah 58 has two bookends: The Day of Atonement (judgment/cleansing of the sanctuary) at the beginning of the chapter (*Isa. 58:1*) and the Sabbath at the end of the chapter (*Isa. 58:13, 14*).<sup>1</sup>

The Feast of Trumpets marked the beginning of 10 days of consecration and repentance before the Day of Atonement. Trumpets were blown on the first day of the seventh month in preparation of the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of the seventh month. (*See Lev. 23:23–27.*)

“My people” (God’s people) in Old Testament times and today embrace the judgment and the cleansing of the sanctuary.

The second bookend, the Sabbath, is another belief claimed by God’s people.<sup>2</sup> God’s complaint is not about His people’s neglect of either of these important beliefs—the Sabbath or the Day of Atonement. Rather, He vehemently objects to their blatant neglect of what comes in between the two bookends—true “fasting” and showing mercy to the poor and oppressed.

As Isaiah lays out the characteristics of the true fast, two words summarize the issues covered in Isaiah 58: *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy*. These terms can be defined as thus:

- “Orthodoxy [Greek: *orthos*—right, and *doxa*—opinion] thus, ‘right-thinking’ or ‘right-believing’
- “Orthopraxy [Greek: *orthos*—right, and *praxis*—acts] thus, ‘right practicing’ or ‘right behaving.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

Another way to define orthodoxy is *knowing* the truth, and orthopraxy is *showing* (living, practicing) the truth. Discuss this statement: “*The passion of orthodoxy must be wedded to the compassion of orthopraxy.*”<sup>4</sup> Then discuss: Where are orthodoxy and orthopraxy shown, or not shown, in Isaiah 58?

Now read the end-time parable in Matthew 25, followed by this commentary on the story from *The Desire of Ages*:

“Thus Christ on the Mount of Olives pictured to His disciples the scene of the great judgment day. And *He represented its decision as turning upon one point.* When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be but two classes, and their eternal destiny will be determined by *what they have done or have neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and the suffering.*”—Ellen G. White, p. 637, emphasis supplied.

<sup>1</sup> Dwight K. Nelson, *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press®, 2005), pp. 18, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Nelson, *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus*, pp. 18, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson, *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson, *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus*, p. 29.

How do believing and practicing the right doctrines relate to the final judgment in Matthew 25?

**Scripture and Illustration:** Read John 2:12–16, Matthew 21:12–17, and Isaiah 56:7. In Jesus’ time, the central place of the worship for God’s people had become a place of injustice.

We can use our church buildings and our Sabbath worship services in our churches to foster an atmosphere of hope and help for all people.

Discuss with your class how your worship service can promote hope and compassion. During the last 15 minutes of class time, ask your class members to begin planning a sample worship service that fosters biblical mercy and help for the poor and the oppressed. Below are some ideas to get them started:

- Remember the oppressed in your prayers.
- Read Scripture that focuses on biblical mercy and justice. There are more than two thousand verses from which to choose.
- Plan a worship service with a mercy-and-justice theme; feature what your church is doing to meet the needs in the community.
- Even the offering time can be focused on mercy and help. Collect special offerings for a specific social need that is spotlighted during some point in your service.
- Analyze your church’s worship practices. Are they just? Are they meaningful to the poor? To the least? To all races? To young children and the elderly? To visitors from off the street? Are other cultures and languages included? Is there signing for the deaf? Ramps for wheelchairs? How does the sermon sound to the homeless, to the abused, the infirm and ailing, to children, or to someone with AIDS?
- Later, discuss with your church leaders ways to regularly incorporate biblical mercy into your church’s worship services.

Evaluate your church. Is it a place of healing or oppression? How so? What can be done?

**Illustration:** If the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* is available, read with your class the words or sing hymn number 581, “When the Church of Jesus.”

Fred Pratt Green wrote this hymn at a time when the church was criticized for being overly concerned with its own life and failing to be engaged with the world around it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wayne Hooper and Edward E. White, *Companion to the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 1988), p. 543.

Discuss how your local church measures up to the challenge of this hymn.

### ***Part III: Life Application***

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One church has posted a sign at the exit of its parking lot. As the worshipers leave the church lot into the community around the church, they pass this sign that reads: “Service Entrance.”

If our Sabbath “worship *service*” is true worship “in spirit and in truth” (*John 4:23, 24*), we will leave the worship place ready to serve God in the way that He calls us in the world. True worship is “of the heart, rather than worship consisting essentially of ritual forms conducted at some particular place.”<sup>6</sup> “In spirit and in truth” means “in all sincerity, with the highest faculties of the mind and emotions, applying the principles of truth to the heart.”<sup>7</sup> If we have truly worshiped, we will not only be closer to our God but closer to the objects of His tender regard—those who are poor, needy, and suffering.<sup>8</sup> “Come close to the great Heart of pitying love, and let the current of that divine compassion flow into your heart and from you to the hearts of others. Let the tenderness and mercy that Jesus has revealed in His own precious life be an example to us of the manner in which we should treat our fellow beings.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimony Treasures*, vol. 2, p. 255.

Read Amos 5:21–24, Amos 8:4–6, and Jeremiah 7:4–7. These texts show that church affiliation and attendance are not enough.

**Ask:** Each Sabbath, generally, where is your mind during and after worship? Where is the attention and affection of your mind and heart directed during the remaining Sabbath hours? Discuss intentional ways to convert Sabbath worship into service during the remainder of the week.

<sup>6</sup> Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald®, 1956), p. 940.

<sup>7</sup> Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 940

<sup>8</sup> Dwight K. Nelson, *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press®, 2005), p. 86.

