God considered the peoples’ worship a “burden” and God was “weary” of suffering through their ceremonies. “When you spread out your hands in prayer,” says God, “I hide my eyes from you…I am not listening.” Why? Because “Your hands are full of blood” (1:15). You cannot live faithfully on Sunday, and selfishly on Monday.

The people of God were corrupt and vicious and false with their neighbors, preying on the weak and the downtrodden. They took God’s support and kindness for granted and looked the other way when they should have taken a stand and righted a wrong. Because their hearts were self-serving, their worship was insincere. God was disinterested and disgusted by their attempts to win God’s favor while they continued to do bad things. God called this people to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), and in this they failed.

Philip Yancey, writing of this spiritual emptiness says, “Church exists primarily not to provide entertainment or to encourage vulnerability or to build self-esteem or to facilitate friendships, but *to worship God*; if it fails in that, it fails….[The] ministers, the music, the sacraments, and the other ‘trappings’ of worship are mere promptings to support the ultimate goal of getting worshipers in touch with God…[The] Old Testament…devotes nearly as much space to specifications for worship in the tabernacle…as the New Testament devotes to the life of Christ.” Then, quoting Walter Wink, Yancey adds, “To worship, is to remember Who owns the house.”

God’s rebuke negates the Israelites’ belief that if they looked busy enough and devout enough God would overlook their sinfulness and spiritual emptiness. In truth, the people *are* busy: going to worship, saying their prayers, hosting their festivals, and performing the rituals and ceremonies as proscribed by the Law. God’s people knew they were out-of-sync with God, so they tried to cover up their mistakes by looking extra-pious. They tried to flatter and appease God with the number of righteous-seeming actions they achieved.

They tried to make a deal with God, but God does not work on a *quid pro quo*basis. God does not forgive based on the number of times we show up for worship, or how loudly we sing, or whether we shed tears as we pray. God’s forgiveness is not as a reward but an act of grace. Worship is not about us or what we are doing, but about what God is doing for us, in us, through us, despite us. Worship is not about how fat the sacrificial cow is, but how fat our faith is and how open our spirit is to God’s Spirit. True worship recognizes the mercy and grace of God, the love and compassion of God, the peace and healing of God. True worship brings us into the very presence of the Living God both for assurance and for adjustment. If our worship does not bring us closer to God, then it is as Jesus said: “This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15:8).

God offers a remedy for meaningless worship. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (1:16-17). God’s anger is about hollow worship; it is also about the peoples’ lack of justice and decency. The people neglected the very things that reveal God’s character: compassion, mercy, and care for the vulnerable. True worship involves aligning our lives with God’s heart for compassion and justice. True worship leads to living with integrity, standing up for the oppressed, defending the rights of the powerless, speaking for the alienated.

For us today, it means advocating for the marginalized, caring for those in need, and confronting unjust systems. It means living out our faith not just in church but in our homes, communities and places of work. What is at stake here is not modes of worship, differing rituals, or denominational customs, but the lives, hearts, and lifestyles of the worshipers themselves as expressed from Monday to Saturday. Isaiah is not saying that we *should not worship*; he is pointing out that God wants our daily lives to match our Sunday professions. How we live in the world should not be at variance with what we profess in our worship. It is this variance that is so offensive to God.

We find reassurance and hope in verses 18-19: “Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.” God offers us a chance to do better. God offers grace for past mistakes and an invitation to restoration. Despite their rebellion, God does not cast the people off completely. God offers a way back and the prospect of healing the deepest stains of sin. God does not ignore our sin; God, who is merciful, forgives and heals the wound of sin.

The imagery of scarlet and crimson evokes permanence, as these colors are notoriously difficult to remove. Think how hard it is to remove a ketchup stain from a shirt, or how the red sock that goes through the wash permanently discolors the other clothes. Yet God promises to make what seems permanent transform into robes that are “white as snow” and “like wool.” The miracle of God’s grace is that what we cannot fix, God fixes for us. Through Jesus, God made a way for us to be cleansed from sin and restored to full fellowship with God. “If we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

John Calvin described faith as a "kind of vessel" with an "open mouth” to receive God’s grace. God is willing and eager to fill us with the salvation earned by Christ, but when we turn our head away from God and close our mouth, we cannot take it in. Any parent will remember their child refusing to eat, turning their heads away from the oncoming spoon filled with food. Here God speaks to us as to a stubborn child. Come then, let us reason together. Let us talk about this. Use your head. Be reasonable. I have something wonderful for you; but if your head is turned and your mouth is closed, you cannot eat it. We must turn back to God (repent) and open our soul (trust) to receive the free grace and wide mercy offered to us in Christ.

This is the way back to God. There is in the heart of God a desire to reconcile and renew rather than condemn. God does not leave us in despair or disrepair. God’s rebuke gives us the opportunity to take stock, reassess, and reevaluate our worship. Are we simply trying to look busy or pious? Or is our worship a true expression of a transformed life? Is our worship little more than a habit? Or does worship spring from a heart fully engaged with God? Do we sing hymns on Sunday but neglect our neighbors on Monday? Or does worship involve gratitude, humility, reverence, and desire to align our lives with God’s will?

God invites us to leave behind our empty rituals and self-centered ways, and to embrace a life of true worship and obedience. We can stop looking busy and start doingthe work that really matters to God. When we say “no” to wrong, when we learn to do good, when we work for justice, when we help the down-and-out, when we stand up for the homeless, when we go to bat for the defenseless, then our hearts are ready to worship God in spirit and in truth. As we begin a new church program year, let us commit ourselves – heart, hands, minds, and muscles – to the worship of God and to the work God sets before us in this time and in this place.

Prayer: Almighty and Merciful God, you are worthy of our best praise and our best effort. We pray for a spirit of sincere worship with hearts centered on You. May all our efforts be worship, bringing honor to Your name. We ask for Your presence to fill our workplaces and homes, guiding our thoughts and actions with Your wisdom and grace. Grant us the strength to overcome challenges and the clarity to make right decisions. Give us the will to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with you. Establish the work of our hands, O Lord, and may our labor be purposeful and a testament to Your goodness. In Your holy name, Amen.

Sources:

* Anonymous saying from *Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, quoted by Hugh Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom: Writings on the Contemplative Life* (Harper Collins, 1999).
* Guzik, David. *Enduring Word Commentary*. Isaiah 1. <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/isaiah-1/>. Retrieved August 25, 2025.
* Yancey, Philip. *Church: Why Bother?* (Zondervan, 2010), 25-26.

**Look Busy**

Sunday, September 7, 2025 [Isaiah 1:1, 10-20](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+1%3a1%2c+10-20&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN Luke 4:14-20

To state the obvious: God is ticked off in this passage! God is aggravated, irritated, exasperated, and infuriated by the peoples’ faithlessness. God is displeased, dissatisfied, discontented, and disappointed with the hollowness of their worship. God is unhappy and upset, sad and sorrowful that God’s people continue to do the wrong thing, when God has clearly told them, repeatedly, the right things to do. God does not pull any punches here; this passage is one of the greatest scoldings of God’s people in all of Scripture.

Listen to how God addresses the people: “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” (1:10). God compares the people to the citizens of cities filled with morally corrupt, despicably sinful, depraved people. God destroyed these cities by raining fire down on them. Associating the people of Israel with the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah is not a compliment; it is the ultimate insult, indicating just how far from God and God’s ways the people are fallen.

God accuses the nation of Judah and the people Jerusalem of spiritual unfaithfulness. They rebel against God’s covenant, practice sin, corruption, and idolatry. There is deliberate injustice perpetrated by the ruling class; and yet, the people present themselves before God as if they are faithful. God’s patience is exhausted. “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” (1:11). The people continued to host religious ceremonies and rituals, trying to make things look good. They continued to make sacrifices and burnt offerings to appease God. But God was disgusted by their false worship, fed up with their words, sick of it all.

This is a sobering thought, and it makes us wonder: what does God think of our worship? Do we offer genuine, heartfelt worship to God or are we just phoning it in? Or does God consider our words false and our praise empty? Does God approve of the way we live our lives or is God disappointed with our choices?

The Israelites thought the answer to their spiritual faithlessness was more religious rituals and more elaborate ceremonies. But since their hearts remained unchanged, unhumbled, and un-surrendered to God, their rituals and ceremonies were “meaningless,” and their incense (prayers) “detestable,” and their assemblies “worthless” (1:13). God *hated* their religious ceremonies and worship services because the peoples’ hearts were not in them.