

# Meaningless Worship is Condemned

Isa 29:9-16

SS Lesson for 06/16/2013

**Devotional Scripture:** Matt 15:7-11

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# Introduction

## Overview and Approach to Lesson

The lesson teaches about the impacts of **Condemnation of Worship that is Meaningless**. The **study's aim** is to find scriptural answers to the problem of meaningless worship and what causes it. The **study's application** is to implement the solutions found in Scripture and to maintain awareness of the problem as well as prevent it from entering our personal and church lives.

### Key Verse: Isa 29:13

*Therefore the Lord said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,*

### Commentary from Barnes Notes

[*Wherefore the Lord said*] This verse, with the following, is designed to denounce the divine judgment on their formality of worship. They kept up the forms of religion, but they withheld the affections of their hearts from God; and he, therefore, says that he will proceed to inflict on them exemplary and deserved punishment.

[*This people draw near me*] That is, in the temple, and in the forms of external devotion.

[*And with their lips do honor me*] They professedly celebrate my praise, and acknowledge me in the forms of devotion.

[*But have removed their heart*] Have withheld the affections of their hearts.

[*And their fear toward me*] The worship of God is often represented as "fear" (Job 28:28; Ps 19:9; 34:11; Prov 1:7).

[*Is taught by the precept of men*] That is, their views, instead of having been derived from the Scriptures, were drawn from the doctrines of mankind. Our Saviour referred to this passage, and applied it to the hypocrites of his own time (Matt 15:8-9). The latter part of it is, however, not quoted literally from the Hebrew, nor from the Septuagint, but retains the sense: 'But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.' He quoted it as strikingly descriptive of the people when he lived, not as saying that Isaiah referred directly to his times.

### Commentary from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

We now see a consequence of the failure to open the scroll and learn the message of Isaiah's prophecy: the people's worship has become empty and meaningless. The people profess loyalty and devotion to God, but their hearts are far from him. They are merely "going through the motions." During his call experience, Isaiah had confessed his own and his people's unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5). Here the lips appear to speak what is right, but whatever they utter is nullified by a heart that has little passion or desire for a genuine relationship with God. Centuries later, Jesus applies these very words to the Pharisees and teachers of the law in his day (Matthew 15:1-9).

### Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

In this passage of Scripture, God addressed the integrity of men as seen by their honesty and commitment to God's honor. It is not what a man says regarding his faith in God but what God sees in his actions that is the heart of the problem. The old saying still holds true: "Actions speak louder than words." God is

impressed only by the honesty of man and not by words that have no substance. Even when Jesus walked among the people, the indictment was the same: "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me" (Matt. 15:8-9). God is not impressed with mere words that flatter and are not sincere. Would you feel honored if someone complimented you to your face but in speaking to others said something unkind about you? Nothing dishonest can stand in the holy presence of God, for He is completely holy. How much of a statement can be a lie and still be true? None! No one will get to heaven because he speaks well and flatters dignitaries and is highly favored in the eyes of the world. The Bible asks, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully" (Ps. 24:3-4). To be dishonest with God is to count Him less than God and someone to whom we can show a lack of respect without fear of consequences or judgment. This was the lie that Satan brought into the world when he tempted Eve in the Garden: "Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Man will never hold such an esteemed position as to be equal with God; even the angels who stand in His presence would not dare to claim such an honor. How dare any man claim such an honor for himself! Mankind continually tries to circumvent God's authority and dethrone Him; even now in our modern day man has embraced the idea of evolution and denied God His rightful place in Creation. As long as humanity believes the lies of the devil, the devil will not give up! There is no substitute for righteousness, and there are no alternate ways to God. If we are going to walk with Him, it must be His way. "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Our courts are overloaded with cases in which someone was promised riches for a small investment, only to find in the end that the promise of quick riches was only a lie. This is what the devil does. He makes his way seem right and rewarding, but in the end it only leads to death and destruction. Jesus told us that there is only one way to God and there will be no other. The issue here is that the unregenerate value the wisdom of this world more than the wisdom of God. The Bible declares that some, "professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:22).

**Commentary from Life Application Bible Notes**

The people claimed to be close to God, but they were disobedient and merely went through the motions; therefore, God would bring judgment upon them. Religion had become routine instead of real. Jesus quoted Isaiah's condemnation of Israel's hypocrisy when he spoke to the Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day (Matthew 15:7-9; Mark 7:6, 7). We are all capable of hypocrisy. Often we slip into routine patterns when we worship, and we neglect to give God our love and devotion. If we want to be called God's people, we must be obedient and worship him honestly and sincerely.

**Approach to the Major Outlines in Lesson**

The outline of the lesson was adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary and from the points revealed by the study of the Scriptural text.

Verse	Phrase	Commentary
9	Pause and wonder!	Meaningless Worship Observed
13	Therefore the Lord said:	Meaningless Worship Explained

**Lesson Introduction and Background**

**From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

In last week's study, we noted how Isaiah called on God's people to include the nations among the audience as they praised the Lord for his great works (Isaiah 12:4). The prophet then proceeded in chapters 13–23 to cite specific nations and cities (including Jerusalem) as the recipients of either judgment or blessing (in some cases, both) from the Lord. Isaiah 24–27 continues the theme of global judgment. Yet interspersed within that message are several glimmers of hope. Isaiah 25:8 is a particularly noteworthy example, foreshadowing the

destruction of death in language found in the description of Heaven in Revelation 7:17; 21:4. Isaiah 29, from which today's printed text is drawn, begins with a "woe" directed toward Ariel. The word Ariel means "altar hearth." The fact that Ariel is also called "the city where David settled" in verse 1 indicates that this term designates Jerusalem. The picture of an altar hearth (a place where a fire burns) is quite fitting for Jerusalem as the home of the temple, where many sacrifices are offered. But it also portrays what awaits Jerusalem, for it is to come under siege and is to be set on fire as part of God's judgment against it (v. 3). In time, however, the "hordes of all the nations that fight against Ariel" (Isaiah 29:7) will themselves be judged and humbled before the Lord (vv. 5-8). They will become like "fine dust" and "blown chaff" (v. 5). Following this promise of deliverance comes the indictment of the people's shallow worship in today's text. It seems that the people of God were their own worst enemies. The insincere worship of the people was just a symptom of a far greater problem that could be remedied only by a serious self-examination and a realignment of the people's thinking toward God's holy purposes.

#### **From the Bible Knowledge Commentary**

In this section a contrast is drawn between the people's present spiritual insensitivity and their future spiritual understanding.

*29:9-12.* The Jerusalemites' spiritual insensitivity was in itself a judgment from God. The people were told to blind themselves (v. 9) but the Lord also caused the blindness (v. 10). The fact that the prophets and the seers did not see and understand clearly was part of God's judgment. They did not understand God's revelation about His judgment on the Assyrians that Isaiah recorded on a scroll (vv. 11-12). No one, either people who could read or those who couldn't, could understand this truth.

*29:13-14.* The people of Jerusalem, professing to know God, were formally involved in acts of worship but they did not worship God from their hearts. They were more concerned with man-made legalistic rules than with God's Law, which promotes mercy, justice, and equity. Because of that, God would judge them; their wisdom would vanish.

*29:15-16.* God pronounced woe on those who thought He did not see their actions. They attempted to hide their plans from God by doing things at night. They were not thinking clearly, for God can hide things from man (vv. 10-12) but not vice versa. Such thinking twisted the facts and confused the potter with the clay. A jar, however, cannot deny that the potter made it, or say that the potter is ignorant (cf. 45:9; 64:8). Actually the people knew nothing of what was going on, but God always knows everything.

## Major Theme Analysis

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

### **Meaningless Worship Observed (Isa 29:9-12)**

9 Pause and wonder! Blind yourselves and be blind! They are drunk, but not with wine; They stagger, but not with intoxicating drink.

10 For the Lord has poured out on you The spirit of deep sleep, And has closed your eyes, namely, the prophets; And He has covered your heads, namely, the seers.

11 The whole vision has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one who is literate, saying, "Read this, please." And he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed."

12 Then the book is delivered to one who is illiterate, saying, "Read this, please." And he says, "I am not literate."

### **Worship darkened by no discernment from the leaders (9-10)**

*No discernment because of leadership rebellion (Jer 2:8)*

8 The priests did not ask, 'Where is the Lord?' Those who deal with the law did not know me; the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols.

*No discernment because of leadership sins (Lam 4:12-14)*

12 The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the world's people, that enemies and foes could enter the gates of Jerusalem. 13 But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous. 14 Now they grope through the streets like men who are blind. They are so defiled with blood that no one dares to touch their garments.

*No discernment because of leadership leading followers astray (Mic 3:5-7)*

5 This is what the Lord says: "As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim 'peace'; if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him. 6 Therefore night will come over you, without visions, and darkness, without divination. The sun will set for the prophets, and the day will go dark for them. 7 The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced. They will all cover their faces because there is no answer from God."

*No discernment because of not knowing what is good and acceptable to God (Rom 12:2)*

2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

*No discernment because of not recognizing what is good (1 Thess 5:21)*

21 Test everything. Hold on to the good.

*No discernment because of not being mature and distinguishing good from evil (Heb 5:14)*

14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

*No discernment because of not seeking it from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:13-16)*

13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. 14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is

not subject to any man's judgment: 16 "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

### **Worship darkened by no understanding of God's Word (11-12)**

*No understanding because of thinking the things of God are foolishness (1 Cor 2:14)*

14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

*No understanding because of seeking answers through human ideas (Acts 17:16-21)*

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

*No understanding because of using human wisdom (1 Cor 1:16-21)*

16 (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel — not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

*No understanding because of minds being veiled by Satan (2 Cor 4:3-4)*

3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

*No understanding because of using rules of man (Matt 15:9)*

9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

### **Meaningless Worship Explained (Isa 29:13-16)**

13 Therefore the Lord said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men, 14 Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work Among this people, A marvelous work and a wonder; For the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, And the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden." 15 Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the Lord, And their works are in the dark; They say, "Who sees us?" and, "Who knows us?" 16 Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, "He did not make me"? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?

## **Hypocrisy in worship (13)**

*Hypocrisy shuts the kingdom of heaven from others (Matthew 23:13)*

13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

*Hypocrisy is trying to judge others when we are in sin (Luke 6:42)*

42 How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

*Hypocrisy causes divisions and obstacles (Romans 16:17-18)*

17 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. 18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

*Hypocrisy is manifested by actions not agreeing with words (Titus 1:15-16)*

15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. 16 They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.

## **No understanding in worship (14)**

*No understanding because of sin that hinders worship (Isaiah 1:15-17)*

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.

*No understanding because of worship where there is no listening to God (Eccl 5:1)*

5 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

*No understanding because of worship where there is no putting lessons learned into action (Ezekiel 33:31)*

31 My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.

*No understanding because of no one being edified (1 Cor 14:16-18)*

16 If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? 17 You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

*No understanding because of worshipers seeking their own desires (2 Tim 4:3-4)*

3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.



## **Arrogance in worship (15-16)**

*Arrogant worship where one is wanting to be seen by others (Matt 6:1)*

6 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

*Arrogant worship where one is desiring the approval and praise of others (Gal 1:10)*

10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

*Arrogant worship where one is when one in authority wants to lord over others (1 Peter 5:2-4)*

2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

*Arrogant worship where one in authority forgets that there is a Master in heaven over all (Eph 6:9)*

9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

*Arrogant worship where one in authority thinks he is above judgment (James 3:1)*

3 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

*Arrogant worship where one in authority is not prepared to have authority (Prov 30:21-23)*

21 "Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: 22 a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, 23 an unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.

## **Conclusion and Other Thoughts**

### ***Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary***

Like many words, the word wonderful has become overused. People can have a “wonderful” time at an almost unlimited number of activities: a baseball game, a family reunion, a birthday party, or for that matter a church gathering. The feeling of wonder, by contrast, seems to be fading from the contemporary frame of reference, especially in the Western world. Advances in technology have become so impressive that seldom do people feel a sense of true wonder at anything anymore. It is easy to forget what makes Christian worship distinct: the wonder of “the old rugged cross.” The people in Isaiah’s day no longer associated the idea of wonder with God. Their worship had become stale and routine. Any weekly worship was done “weakly.” So Isaiah announced the Lord’s response: “Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder” (Isaiah 29:14). Paul says that this wonder has been provided by something that at first glance does not appear to be all that wonderful as the term is commonly used—the cross of Christ. One reason the cross must remain at the center of Christian worship is because of what it says about the wisdom of this world. That wisdom, as impressive as it may seem at times, receives a grade of F in matters of the spiritual realm (1 Corinthians 1:18-23). And nothing says that more clearly than “the offense of the cross” (Galatians 5:11). Only as we keep the wonder of the cross uppermost in our preparation for corporate worship can real worship occur.

Another factor affecting the people’s worship in Isaiah’s day was their attitude toward God’s revealed truth. For the leaders of the people of God, the words of the prophet had become a sealed document. No one, whether educated or uneducated, had a real hunger to know what the scroll contained. Every Christian ought to be a

Bible reader. It is the one habit, which, if done in the right spirit, more than any other one habit, will make a Christian what he ought to be in every way. If any church could get its people as a whole to be devoted readers of God's Word, it would revolutionize the church. If the churches of any community, as a whole, could get their people, as a whole, to be regular readers of the Bible, it would not only revolutionize the churches, but it would purge and purify the community as nothing else could do. What a tragedy that many Christians do not make a more determined effort to know God's Word better! Our worship will remain shallow if our Bibles remain "sealed" and unused.

***Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator***

1. Spiritual blindness can be both the choice of man and the judgment of God (Isa. 29:9-10; cf. 6:9-10; Mic. 3:6)
2. Only God can reveal and conceal spiritual truth (Isa. 29:11-12; cf. Matt. 16:17; II Cor. 4:4-6)
3. God is not fooled by outward actions that have no inward reality (Isa. 29:13; cf. I Sam. 16:7)
4. True wisdom is always a gift from God (Isa. 29:14; cf. Jas. 1:5)
5. A person might run from God, but he can never hide from God (Isa. 29:15; cf. Ps. 139:7-12; Jonah 1:1-4)
6. It is ludicrous for the created to sit in judgment of the Creator (Isa. 29:16; cf. Rom. 9:20-21)