

Last week we were challenged by Isaiah's prophecy to examine where we turn in time of difficulty. Does our speech show that we trust in man or in God? We tried to see ourselves as God sees us and discern whether or not we are fooling ourselves. The people of Judah were like a man who was sick and beaten within an inch of his life, and they thought they were just fine. We saw the importance of receiving conviction, and that it is *the violent sweetness of God opposing the sins lying comfortably undisturbed in our lives.*

That passage ended by saying that the grace of God in leaving them a remnant was the only reason they hadn't been destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (Isaiah 1:9). The next section begins by calling them rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrah. ¹⁰ *Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!* Isaiah 1:10 The entire nation was to hear what God was about to say to them. We know it's not going to be pretty because God is calling them Sodomites (Ezekiel 16:48-49). While God had not treated them as he did those wicked cities, it wasn't because they didn't deserve it.

Now if we heard God begin to speak to us like that, what would our reaction be? We would probably start listing all the good things that we do, which is probably where their minds went. But that is what God is about to address, the very things we think should earn us favor in God's sight. The first thing we might think of is our faithful fulfillment of religious duties, our perfect doctrinal stances, and the way we are consistent to attend church and Bible study. That is why what followed was shocking to the hearers.

¹¹ *"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.* Isaiah 1:11 God is describing sacrifices that He requested in Leviticus. Not only had the people been offering exactly what God requested, they had done so in abundance. They had perfected religious ritual. They fed those animals until they were good and fat. They gave God the best. How could God say He had enough of what He requested? The people may have been a bit dumbfounded at first (Proverbs 15:8).

Today it would be like God saying, "What to me is your faithful and consistent church attendance? I've had enough of you being at church every Sunday and at your weekly Bible study. I do not delight in your tithing a full 10% without fail. What would you say? I might say, "Huh? Is that you God?"

So He continues to help us get the point. ¹² *"When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts?"* Isaiah 1:12 To appear before Him, was to come into the Temple, into the courts of the LORD before the Holy Place that housed the throne of God, the ark of the covenant. When we come into God's presence, who required us to be seen all over the church?

Once again we might ask, "Where else would you want us to be?" God seems to have forgotten that He was the One that insisted that all males come to at least three of the annual feasts to appear before Him (Exodus 23:17). "Who required us to come trample the courts? You did (Exodus 34:23)!"

The next verse begins to clarify just what God was addressing. It was not their perfect religious activity, but the heart and actions behind it. ¹³ *Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.* Isaiah 1:13 Offerings are only vain when there is a wrong motivation in the heart of the giver. Samuel spoke for God when he declared, "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to harken than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). **If there is no intention to hear and obey God, the offering is meaningless.** Worse than that, it is an affront to God.

In the east, there is a tradition of giving and expecting something back. If you wanted something from someone, you just keep giving them gifts until they finally give you what you want. It is somewhat manipulative. It is the way people treat their idols and false gods. They think if they keep giving gifts to pacify the god that they will win its favor. That is thinking of God in human terms. I give Him what He wants and He will give me what I want. **That is treating God like an idol. God doesn't need anything.** He doesn't need the meat on the altar or your \$20 in the offering plate. He doesn't really smell the incense. That is all for us to have a physical picture to understand deeper truths (Colossians 2:17).

Without a heart to hear and obey, offerings are in vain. Do we really think we can manipulate God? That is misguided and insulting to God. God makes the problem clear when He says He can't endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Solemn assembly was a time for the people to come and examine their heart and repent (Leviticus 23:36). But they would come together in fasting, bow their heads, and shed some tears while thinking about how they can do some wicked action. God says He can't endure that! He just can't put up with it.

¹⁴ *Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.* Isaiah 1:14 God has listed about every biblical worship gathering that Israel was instructed to have. The people would come, but God hated the events. Those perfectly performed religious ceremonies mock Him. Worship without a heart to hear and obey is a declaration that the worshiper sees God

on par with an idol that is pleased with mere performance or physical gifts. The various worship services had become a burden to God.

Does God get tired? That's not possible, but so that we could understand, He calls these meaningless worship services something He is weary of bearing. He'd rather they quit coming to the Temple and going through the motions than to take the God prescribed forms of worship and treat them like pagans treat their idols.

God isn't a great genie in the sky who gives us what we want when we give Him what He wants. Prayer isn't a means to make life easy and avoid problems. God Almighty has every detail of every day in the palm of His hand. Nothing, absolutely nothing happens without His consent. And regardless of Him allowing evil to do its worst, He will through it all be glorified and held in awe by all who see what He has done. It's a blessing to serve Him and do His will and give an offering. This way of seeing worship is a huge contrast with those who go through the worship motions thinking they are making God happy with them so they can get something they desire. That thinking is missing the reality of who God is and who we are.

15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Isaiah 1:15 Prayer is the opportunity to join in what God is doing, not for Him to join in what you are doing. He doesn't exist to help you do what you want; you exist for His glory. If you are willing to respond to His gracious invitation, you get to serve Him by praying His will into the earth. Your desires are transformed to match His (1 John 5:14). Then you experience real prayer as you pray His heart.

What God was seeing in Judah wasn't just selfish prayers, it was requests for blessings from those who would not bless others. Whether or not God is saying they are literally guilty of shedding the blood of others or not I do not know. Some of the people of Judah may have been covering all their bases with child sacrifices to Molech (Leviticus 18:21). They thought, "If YHWH wasn't pleased enough with their sacrifices to bless them, maybe Molech would be."

It may be that God is referring to murder in the way that Jesus would 700 years later (Matthew 5:22). To hate another is to murder them in your heart. God may be referring to unforgiveness and hatred. Jesus said that if we would not forgive others, our heavenly Father would not forgive us (Matthew 6:15). If they were praying for forgiveness or blessing with hatred in their hearts, God would see their hands symbolically covered in blood.

Whatever the case, they were guilty and God wasn't going to listen to their requests until they dealt with their guilt. We can't come before a holy God unless we are in Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). If their sacrifices were in vain, they were missing the whole symbolism in sacrifice. They thought God was pleased with the meat when it was intended for

them to see the cost of sin and how one day God would provide the ultimate and effectual sacrifice for sin.

In the New Testament, Peter tells men that if we don't want our prayers to be hindered, we better treat our wives right (1 Peter 3:7). Our spiritual state has a lot to do with how we pray and if our prayers are effective (James 5:16).

So what were they to do? God couldn't tolerate their ritual worship regardless of how perfectly it was performed. He wouldn't listen to their prayers because of their guilt. Those were the two things they were relying on to be right with God. What now?

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, Isaiah 1:16 But how do they wash themselves? When the people of Israel were preparing to meet with God on Sinai, they washed themselves (Exodus 19:10). Cleaning up the outward body is symbolic of cleaning up our heart and our actions. Stop doing evil. But how could they do that?

God wanted from them what He wants from us, to look to Him and see our true condition. If we would come before Him we must recognize our need for Him to cleanse us. It begins with repentance, but then it must be followed with our total dependence on God to change us. We can choose to intentionally stop doing what is wrong, but we can't keep from doing what is wrong without God's help (John 15:5). We do all that we are able to make things right, like Zacchaeus who gave away half his wealth and restored fourfold anything he had taken fraudulently (Luke 19:8). True repentance takes immediate action to change what is wrong.

¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. They had fallen so far they needed someone to teach them what a good action was. God began pointing out a few things. Seek justice. Don't try to get away with unjust gain. God is just so we should be just in all we do, regardless of how much it costs us.

Correct oppression. If there were slaves that were being treated more like property than like people, then attitudes and actions needed to change. If you see people oppressing others, warn them. Do what you are able to help the oppressed.

Seek justice for the orphan and widow. God often brings up their need because they were vulnerable and taken advantage of (James 1:27). Someone needed to stand up for them. God was telling Judah that everyone needs to stand up for them. We can stand up for justice, against oppression, and for the vulnerable in our society. Who is being taken advantage of, and what can you do to help them?

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 like crimson, they shall become like wool. Isaiah 1:18 While God's indictment is severe, His invitation is gracious. In spite of

their hypocritical worship that God detested, and their failure to turn to God in their desperation, God still invited them to come and reason with Him.

God had called them on their bloody hands, but now He is telling them that they can be white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. How? What could change a sinner's bloody hands to pure white? Only Another who could take our sin and whose blood could be spilled in our place. Only when we accept that we can never wash our own hands clean. We don't have the solvent strong enough, but God does (Colossians 1:20). He provides it in Christ for those who will come and reason with Him.

Here is His promise: *¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;* Isaiah 1:19 When you come to the Almighty, when you appear before Him, it isn't to offer Him something that will appease Him. He is the One who has provided the One who has made us acceptable to God. It is to reason with us. It is to have us accept the reality that He is God and we are created for His glory (Isaiah 43:7).

If we are willing to see things as God sees them, and willing to be obedient to His good will by receiving His Son, He will cleanse our blood stained hands. The land will be healed when we are healed. Instead of the empty field picked over by foreigners, we will eat the good of the land. The spiritual condition we saw last week of bareness will be transformed into fruitfulness.

In the nation of Israel, God promised physical blessing for obedience to the Laws of God (Leviticus 26:3-4). This promise for them was both physical and spiritual. While some claim the same is true today, we prize spiritual prosperity above else. To have the fruits of the Spirit expressed in our life and be transformed into the image of Christ is our desire (Romans 8:29). For us to enjoy the good of the land is to enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit and His fruits. It's to enjoy the fellowship of believers and grow together with them. That's eating the good of this new kingdom we've become a part of.

The Spirit of God is the same with all of us. He invites us to come and reason with Him. He sets before us the promise of goodness if we are willing and obedient. Notice it takes both. Some are willing, but never get around to being obedient. We have to take the step of obedience, making Jesus the Lord of our life, and following where He leads.

The promise is followed by a warning. *²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*" Isaiah 1:20 In verse 2 the Lord has already declared Judah was in rebellion. They now have an invitation to make a change. The invitation comes with the promise of God. It's another chance, one after so many that had been given previously. But if they refuse and rebel against this gracious invitation, they will face the sword. The last verse of Isaiah is the fulfillment of this verse. It tells us of the destruction of the rebellious (Isaiah 66:24).

This is the declaration that comes from the mouth of YHWH. Repent and be cleansed and enjoy God's promises or refuse and continue to rebel and die by the sword. If we will not be cleansed we will be judged. Promise or punishment, it's up to us. It's up to you. Will you come and reason with God? Are you willing and obedient or will you stubbornly refuse the good grace of God offered to you?

Questions

- 1 How did God describe Judah's worship?
- 2 How did God feel about it?
- 3 What does "appear before me" mean?
- 4 What does "trample my courts" mean?
- 5 What burdens God?
- 6 Why does God refuse to hear prayer?
- 7 What is God's solution?
- 8 What is the invitation?
- 9 What is the promise?
- 10 What is the warning?