

If You Are Willing and Obedient

August 7, 2022

Pastor John Mars

I'd like to read a passage of scripture from the book of Isaiah, chapter 1, beginning with verse 10.

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah!
“The multitude of your sacrifices--what are they to me?” says the Lord.
“I have more than enough burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
When you come to appear before me, who has asked you to trample my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations--I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates.
They have become a burden to me; and I am weary of bearing them.
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; wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight and stop doing wrong, learn to do right!
Seek justice, encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless and plead the case of the widow.
Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord.
“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow;
though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.
If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best of the land;
but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.”
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

Alright, this message comes with a disclaimer. Don't you hate it when that happens?
This message comes with a disclaimer: This is not a hellfire and damnation sermon. It begins and ends with good news. Now along the way you may get convicted, but if you get convicted, it ain't my fault. I didn't do it. You did, whatever it was.

I want to begin with a dog story. I love dogs and dogs love me. I like cats, but in a different way. Ask me after the service, I'll tell you how. God willing and the creek don't rise, you're going to hear a lot of stories about this particular dog. I believe she was my favorite dog. Her name was Daisy; Daisy May, if she was in trouble. Daisy was a German Shorthaired Pointer and she and I terrorized the upland game birds of southwest Idaho for years. She and I spent hours together and I could talk with her like she was somebody. And she minded me better than most kids. She was willing and obedient to do anything I asked her to do, but make no mistake about it, she was a one-man dog. When my wife Jeannine and I got married, Jeannine would tell Daisy to do something and Daisy would act as if she was deaf. And quite literally, I have memories of Jeannine telling Daisy to do something and Daisy would turn her head slowly toward me and go, “Dad, do you want me to do that?” Daisy's willingness and obedience was definitely conditional on who was giving the orders.

Isaiah says that God wants to bless, but it is conditional on our willingness and obedience. So, I want you to hear the good news. The good news is that God wants to bless. God wants to bless us as individuals, God wants to bless us as a congregation, but it is indeed conditional on willingness and obedience. Now, there is no doubt that Isaiah's sermon is hellfire and damnation. You can't sugarcoat that. But he's trying to make a point. So let me put this in historical context, and it will make more sense. At this point in history God's people, the chosen nation, the children of Israel, had become very rebellious, very sinful. There was great infighting and they had actually divided into two nations; not one but two. There was the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom was called Israel because it consisted of nine and a half of the original twelve tribes. The southern kingdom was called Judah and it consisted of two and a half tribes. But Judah was far and away the most numerous, the most prosperous and the wealthiest of all the tribes of Israel. And in Judah was Jerusalem and in Jerusalem was the temple and the temple was the center of Jewish religious life. Isaiah was a prophet, primarily to Judah and primarily in Jerusalem. It was a very turbulent time in history. Israel actually existed between world powers, dominant powers of the era. The kingdoms on either side of them were world powers that waxed and waned in their power. You probably have noticed, though we hear an awful lot about Israel, Israel is actually a very, very small country. Think the County of Okanagan here in Washington. Think Malheur County in Oregon. Think Owyhee County in Idaho. It is about the size of a county in the western United States. And when these world powers went to war, quite generally to get to one another, they had to go through guess where? Israel! And they would just kick the snot out of Israel on their way through just for practice.

Israel existed only because of divine intervention. God sent Isaiah to Judah to warn them and He did so over and over and over and over and over again for years. The message that I read to you just a moment ago, that message is repeated basically for over half of the book of Isaiah again and again and again, because God is patient and God is kind and God is longsuffering and does not want to punish but wants to bless. But He cannot bless a rebellious, sinful people. They are given ample warning. They are given ample opportunity to turn from their wicked ways. You see, their ritual had become rote and it had no meaning. God desires right relationship over right religious ritual. God desires right living more than right theology. Yeah, I said it and I'll say it again. God desires right living over right theology. You can believe all the right things and live it out in exactly the wrong way. You can be absolutely right and completely wrong.

Temple worship was spectacular. The temple and the temple complex were a wonder of the ancient world. It was said that there was a vine on the inside of the temple that stretched all the way around the temple and from that vine were clusters of grapes the size of a man. And the grapes on the clusters were bigger than a man's head and all of those grapes were solid gold. The implements used in worship were gold and silver and were bejeweled with all kinds of precious stones. It looked good. It was impressive. It was magnificent. It was lavish. It was correct. And it was pure hypocrisy in the eyes of Isaiah. Through Isaiah the prophet, God says, "Take this garbage away from Me. You make Me want to puke! Go and learn how to do right. Address the needs of the least of these among you. Learn to have right relationships with each other and the foreigners among you. And then you come back and see Me!"

We read these words of Isaiah and we find out what the worship was like and we say, "Oh yeah, get 'em, Isaiah. They deserve it."

I'm reminded of a story I once heard of a new preacher in Kentucky, preaching his very first sermon at his church. Now, if you're not familiar with that area of the country, the cash crops of Kentucky are tobacco and bourbon. And this new pastor got up and he preached a hellfire and damnation sermon on the evils of alcohol and tobacco. Now you know how that went over! After the service was over, his elders called him on the carpet and he said, "Well, I can't help but preach about sin." And they said, "We don't care if you preach about sin, just don't preach about our sin!"

The Word of God has a way of transcending dates on a calendar and locations on a map. I wonder what Isaiah has to say, speaking to us from a land far, far away and a time long, long ago. What does he have to say about modern Christianity? Did you know that there have been more people killed in the name of God than for any other reason in the modern era? Did you know that under the Christian banner there are more hate crimes committed every year than for any other reason? Did you know that negativity and outright hatred among Christians is rampant? Did you know that? Did you know that the world uses such words as "negative, pessimistic, judgmental, prejudicial and hateful" to describe you and I? Did you know that? That's what the world thinks of us today.

How do we address that? You don't address that with argument. You don't address that with writing colorful columns. You address that by living it down. Not by arguing it down, but by living it down. By our lives, by the way we live, by the way we conduct ourselves, by the way we treat others, we say, "That may be true of others but it is not true of us." The only worship worthy of God are lives that reveal His character, His righteousness, His justice, His purity, His love, His mercy. In Micah 6:8, the prophet says, "What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God." Our lives must vindicate and validate what we believe. Our lives must make the love of God known. People must see Jesus in us and in our church. And if they don't see Jesus in us and in our church, then our religion is useless, fruitless and pointless. Now, if you didn't know, that's where the conviction comes in but it is also where the balm comes in. And I need to stop here for a moment. As I was practicing this, I realized that I couldn't tell the difference between my saying of "bomb" and "balm." One is B O M B and the other is B A L M. They mean very different things. This is the balm, B A L M. This is the salve. This is the good news. Isaiah says, "If you are willing and obedient, God will bless you." In the New Testament we read in First John, chapter one, verse nine, where the disciple John says, "If we repent of our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us of our sins and will cleanse us of all unrighteousness." So, I want you to hear the good news. If you have repented of your sins, receive these words: You are forgiven. You hear me? If you have repented of your sins, you are forgiven. The Psalmist says that God casts those sins in the sea of forgetfulness and remembers them no more. They are cast from us as far as the east is from the west. You know why it's as far as the east is from the west? Because you can measure the distance from north to south but you cannot measure the distance from east to west. Hear this: If you have repented of your sins, you are forgiven and God acts as if they never happened. Hear the further good news that if you repent of your sins, if by chance you happen to have been convicted earlier, God wants to forgive. God is not an ogre standing over you with a lightning bolt and a club, waiting for you to mess up so He can smite you. God wants to forgive you and bless you.

And what is true of an individual is also true of a church. Did you know that God wants to bless the church? Did you know that? God, in God's wisdom, has chosen to work through the church. Did you know that God wants to bless Central United Protestant? That's the good news. And God already is blessing. We are seeing new people attend. We are having new people join. Old programs are being revived. New programs are being started. Old positions are being filled. New positions are being created. But folks, this is the tip of the iceberg. God's love is unfailing and unconditional. God loves you, period. End of discussion. Get used to the idea. God's love is unconditional but God's forgiveness and blessing are not. Isaiah said, "If you are willing and obedient." The New Testament says, "If you repent of your sins." They are the same thing.

It's an if-then proposition. If we are willing and obedient, then God will forgive our sins and bless as an individual and also as a church. It really is just that simple. Either we are or we're not. The fruit is in the living. We shall see. We shall see. Let us pray together.

So, in the quietness of this time, I want you to hear the good news again and again and again that God wants to bless. He wants to bless you and this congregation. It's dependent on us. So, whatever God has put on your heart to do at this moment, do it right now in your heart and your mind. Let's pray together.

Lord, we are so grateful for the promise of guaranteed forgiveness. God, give us courage to be willing and obedient. In Jesus' name. Amen.