

Penitent Worship

Isaiah 1:10-20, July 12, 2015

Trinity Sunday VI, by Pastor Kenneth Miller

Sermon Text, Isaiah 1:10-20:

“Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.”

Beloved of the Lord..... About a hundred years ago there was a German by the name of Julius Wellhausen, who wrote a book about the Old Testament in which he turned the history completely around. As you know, the prophets' writings come at the end of the OT, because they wrote and worked toward the end of the OT age, whereas Moses wrote at the beginning of Israel's history, and therefore his five books come first. But most of the big-name scholars of the Old Testament follow this man Wellhausen, who said the prophet came first, and then the “so-called books of Moses” (as he put it) were written last. And they say it had to be that way, because the prophets of Israel were against the Temple and sacrifices and incense and all the formal worship. That, they say, was the golden age of pure, sincere religion, and later on, when the spirit was gone, the priests took over and set up the ritual. And, they insist, the prophets like Isaiah would have been horrified to see all that ritual, and these scholars condemn it. They point to passages like our text for today and say this proves their point.

Well, it is no proof at all. It is true that Isaiah condemns the worship at the Temple – but that only proves it was already in use in his day. And, in fact, it is not the worship of the ritual that is condemned here to begin with. It is false and insincere worship that Isaiah, by inspiration, condemns. He condemns it because the people thought they could do their religious duties in the Temple and then God had to be on their side and bless them. They thought their worship was a good work that earned God's favor, but they did not repent in their hearts at all but lived selfish and corrupt lives. So it is not formal worship that is wrong. It is not candles and incense and the sign of the cross and the altar and liturgical garments that are wrong, nor the church music and formal-style hymns and printed prayers that are wrong. What is wrong and wicked is worship that, no matter how sincere and reverent it may be, does not come from a truly repentant spirit. This is the message of the prophet for today, for in our text he first makes the point that:

I. The (outward) worship of the unrepentant is hateful to God. At the beginning of our text we read: **Hear the word of the lord, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our god, ye people of Gomorrah.** Sodom and Gomorrah? These cities had long since disappeared from the face of the earth. But the people and rulers of Jerusalem and Judah, the chosen people, the Jews, are addressed as citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. This was surely an insult to them. How dare anyone call them such a name? They were Jews. They went to the Temple all the time and worshipped the true God. They never failed. They were good church members, faithful ones. And yet the Lord says they are no better than these terrible, perverted heathen. Why?

Well, He goes on to explain. He says their worship and sacrifices are quite meaningless. He says, **To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?** Why do you offer so many of them? What good does it do? It can't be because I need them, for I am full of them. It can't be because they please me, all these animals you slaughter on the altar. I don't delight in them, as David already told you in Ps. 51. It can't be because I commanded them either, even though you were commanded to come and worship here in the Temple. It is not out of a spirit of loving obedience that you come here, but with a spirit of pride and self-righteousness. You come and sacrifice and pray here because you think you are doing a good thing by it for which you should be rewarded; or else it is because you think these sacrifices will take away the guilt of your sins and you will escape punishment for them. That is plain to see because you aren't satisfied to worship at the times God has commanded, but you have added more festivals of your own and more holy days than He required. What you want is to think of yourselves as extra holy, so that you might be rewarded with the good life.

But God is not pleased. See the rising series of expressions of anger here in our text. He says, **To what purpose is it? I am full of them, I delight not in them, who hath required this? Bring no more, incense is an abomination to me. I cannot away with the assemblies, it is iniquity. My soul hateth your feasts, they are a trouble to me. I am weary to bear them. I will hide mine eyes and not hear your prayers.** Let us translate these expressions into modern English for a moment. What He is saying is: What good are your sacrifices? I am fed up with them. I don't like all this slaughter. I didn't ask you to come and trample my Temple courts. Don't bring them. Your incense stinks. I can't stand your gatherings. They are wicked. I hate them. They're a nuisance. I'm tired of them, and I won't listen when you pray to Me.

Now, this is mighty strong language. Does it mean that God doesn't want us to come to church and worship, pray, and sing His praises nor to celebrate special festivals? By no means. He commanded it, and in fact the first congregation in Jerusalem after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost continued daily with one accord in the temple. What God hates is conceited, selfish, insincere, careless, thoughtless, and empty worship. He hates it when people just go through the motions in church and think God must be pleased with them. He hates it when people think they can be saints on Sunday and devils the rest of the week. He loathes it when they think they can keep the Third commandment and break all the rest, or at least ignore them. He can't stand it when people praise God with their lips and even with their money, but at the same time hate or mistrust someone or lust after their neighbor. All the hymns and prayers and church attendance and Bible reading they do are useless and worthless then. And God is fed up when people sing His praises loudly, but in their heart they do not love and trust in Him, do not want to submit to His will and resent His interference in their lives, but come with the attitude that if I attend church God will stay at arm's length and won't make life difficult for me or punish me for my sins.

What of our worship? Does it come from a humble heart that praises God for His mercy in forgiving our sins? Or does it come from habit, or do we feel we are doing a good work by it or doing God a favor? Or do we feel that church is merely a formality? Or a duty? Or is it because it makes us feel that we are good? Or is it because we like the music or the atmosphere or the style of service here? If so, it is useless; it is only outward, and God has no interest in it, and He will not even hear our prayers, though we stand and pray for hours at a time.

But then, what shall we do, if we have been giving empty worship to God some of the time or all of the time? Shall we say, as some do, that organized religion and worship is just a dead form? Shall we say, I don't really need church: I can worship at home or out on a lake sincerely and spontaneously? No, this will not do; for the Third Commandment still stands, "*Sanctify the holy day.*" The Bible says, *Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is.* What then, shall we do? The Lord answers:

II. We must repent of our sins before we can worship aright. What does that mean, to repent of our sins? We read the answer: **Wash you, make you clean. Put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do well. Seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.** This means, (1) recognizing our uncleanness and unworthiness, for how can a person ever wash himself, unless he knows he is dirty. And if we look into our life and conscience, we can surely examine ourself by the Commandments. Do you truly fear, love and trust in God above all things and keep His name sacred? Do you honor and obey parents, employers and government? Is your heart free of anger and thoughts of vengeance, or of sexual lust and desire, or of greed? Have you never stolen or been dishonest? Have you never spoken ill of others, or coveted their property? Have you never fought with your wife or husband or insulted them? Have you always loved your neighbor and been at peace with him even when he did you wrong? **Wash you.** Repentance also means, (2) heartfelt sorrow over sin and disgust at it, for whoever cleans himself up shows that he hates being dirty.

But repentance also means, (3) that we know where our cleansing comes from. The well that we draw the cleansing water from is our Savior, Jesus Christ, the water is His perfect obedience rendered in our place and His innocent suffering and death for us. And the washing itself is faith in Him, trusting in the truth that His work covers and takes away all our guilt and the blood on our hands that without Christ makes our prayers hateful to God. Repentance also means, (4) a genuine desire to be cleansed by the Savior. For if we hate our sins, and want to be saved, we must first be delivered from our guilt, for "*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.*" Repentance also means not only wanting, but accepting or believing in the forgiveness of our sins through Christ and His work. It is trusting in the fact, the truth, that the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, does cleanse us from all sins. It is taking comfort and resting our souls in the merits of Jesus.

There are some who say there is yet one more part to repentance, and they claim to find it in this text, namely, a changed life. For, they say, these words say, **Put away the evil of your doings, cease to do evil, learn to do well,** etc. But these words are not put here to add a condition to forgiveness, nor to describe repentance itself, but to describe the fruits of repentance and faith. These are the things that follow faith and forgiveness. They do not come before it, and are not a part of it.

When we read **cease to do evil, learn to do well,** these words stand as a rebuke to expose our sins, to show us what we have not done and how we have offended God. For how can we learn to do well if we are not first forgiven and born again and joined to Christ by faith? Jesus said, "*Without me ye can do nothing.*" And again the Bible says, "*Without faith it is impossible to please God.*" So these words and commands do not describe repentance, but the Christian life that follows from faith in the forgiveness of sins. It is only by forgiveness, only through Christ that we can have eternal life or please God and worship Him aright. When once we see the ugly truth that we are by nature sinful and unclean, then we must put aside all laws and commandments and go on to the next words of our text: **come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord:** listen now, and

I will show you can really be justified and acceptable to God. Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow. That is, though you are covered with the blood of your neighbor because of your crimes against him, you will be clean and pure as the driven snow in my sight. Every trace of your sin will be gone from before mine eyes and I will see you as perfect and without spot or blemish. And **Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.** Crimson is an even deeper shade of red. The Hebrew word has the idea of a cloth being dipped into the dye a second time to make it redder still. So no matter how terrible your sins, they shall be as wool, which is always white by nature, and not colored, checked, or spotted. In other words, just as Christ's work was complete atonement for sins, so God's work is also complete forgiveness.

But what of the words that follow? **If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land, but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.** Don't these words add a condition of obedience for salvation? No, they do not. For one thing, because believers are obedient to the Gospel. They forsake all thought of their own goodness and believe that Christ is their righteousness before God. For another thing, believers are also willing and obedient to God's Law and they love and obey it. This is, we repeat once again, the *result* of faith or genuine repentance. It does not come first. It is a mark or sign of true repentance. And if anyone still refuses to obey God, that is a sign that his repentance and faith are a sham, they are not sincere. To go on hating or lusting or rebelling or cursing or being a drunkard and not even caring about it shows simply that a man was never sorry for his sins in the first place and never wanted to be forgiven for them, but only wanted to escape being punished. Where there is true repentance and faith, there we hate sin and love to obey God.

These last words of our text are added here for a promise and a warning, just like the close of the commandments, and they promise earthly blessings for those who repent and believe. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. That is, God will provide for you everything you need, and, if it will benefit you, also a life of peace and contentment here on earth, entirely aside from the fact that heaven is yours. Things like good food, friends, a happy home, a good job and a contented and happy life come from God as blessings on those who obey His commandments out of faith in Christ. And crime, prison, unhappiness, a miserable marriage, poverty, sickness, loneliness and emptiness often comes from disobedience and rebellion against God's commandments, for there is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked.

Therefore Isaiah says, **seek judgment**, or justice by being fair and good to everyone. **Relieve the oppressed** by lifting their burdens and helping them all you can and taking their part when they are unjustly accused or persecuted. Judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. These are the most helpless of people, and everyone takes advantage of them because they are. So our work is to intercede for them wherever we can, and help them to be treated fairly and not be cheated and robbed. And we should especially be careful not to cheat them ourselves. One of the most shameful sights of all is to see what happens when a man dies, and relatives fight and scrap to get all they can, even cheating their own flesh and blood, their own mothers and brothers and children, so as to get a few dollars more. This is not the way Christians act. Christians are content with the Lord's goodness and with His promise of eternal salvation, and they like to be fair and generous to others and to help the most needy, even if it costs them a great deal.

So let us not worship our Lord with sin, with hands stained with blood, but with repentance, faith and good works. Amen.

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