

Sermon for Sunday, July 24, 2011
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Grace Leads to Repentance
Isaiah 55

Newton's Third Law of Motion states, "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction." I'd loved to test this law as a child with my friend's pool table. More than just numerically, chapters 54-55 follow on the heels of Chapter 53. The relationship is something akin to action and response. When we see the clarity of Jesus' work, a response is demanded!

Chapter 53 describes the amazing saving work of Jesus. He has done everything that is required to be reconciled to God. He took our sin on himself. He gave us his righteousness. He added us to his family. He continues to intercede for us. What is the appropriate reaction/response? This is what we find in chapters 54-55: praise, singing, responding in faith and enjoying the blessing of what Christ has won.

We sing and praise because God has rescued us from our shame, (54:4). We praise because God reconciles the broken relationship with his people. We sing because our God vindicates us (v. 17), and holds the future secure for us! We sing and praise.

But that's not all we do in response to the Servant punished in our place. We come to him, we are called to follow after him, to walk in his ways as disciples. We are called, especially, to come to him when his ways don't make sense to us. This is the subject of chapter 55.

Isaiah 55:1 "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.³ Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.⁴ See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples.⁵ Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor."

⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.⁷ Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.⁸ "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher

than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.¹³ Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed."

When I was at Covenant Seminary in the mid-1990s I led groups of students over to China to teach English. We met many students and introduced them to the gospel, and by God's grace, saw a number of them come to Christ. In fact, that is where Clay Coffee and I got to know one another well.

On one of our trips, before coming back home, we made a trip to visit the Great Wall of China. It is a magnificent structure, built along the ridges of mountains, purposed to keep invaders from getting in...and perhaps from keeping some from getting out! The wall is stone, designed to be wide enough for seven horses to pass together along its top. It has guard turrets every so often, especially at high points.

In one section we hiked, the march was especially steep, and we had our eyes set on one guard post as our goal. But when we reached it, we not only were able to look back to see from where we've come, but also see ahead to the real destination, the peak of this section of the wall. In the midst of the journey, we were able to see the way behind and the way ahead.

God's grace does that for us on at least two levels in this passage. We see first, what Jesus, the Suffering Servant has done, in his life, death and resurrection on our behalf. We see his goodness to save us, to stand in our place. And we also see where we're headed, in verses 12 and 13, into a place of peace. That marvelous biblical word of peace is so much more than the absence of conflict. It is a full word for flourishing, where the world works as it should and will only be filled with blessing. Where thorn bushes are replaced by fruitful trees, where the mountains sing, and the trees clap with praise!

This renewed Creation will be an everlasting sign of what God has done for us in Christ. We will forever experience his favor, and he will remake this world fit perfectly to be populated with a people who experience that favor. What a deal.

The second level, is personal. In light of what God has done for us in Christ, we can see our past, our sin and death, our idolatry, that he died to cover over, but also with a view toward where we are going, to enjoy him forever! We are united with Jesus, and because of that, our journey matches the path he blazed for us.

God's grace has appeared to us in Christ. So how do we respond to it?

Isaiah makes plain, there is a response. We are called to come in repentance, turning away from one source of satisfaction to another! The central facet to this chapter is verses 6-7. The core of what we are called to do in light of what the Servant Jesus has done for us in chapters 53-54 is to REPENT.

I. Repent of our Poverty (55:1-2).

There is an invitation that goes out to the thirsty, and to the poor. In verses 1-2 he says "Come." Obviously this refers not only to physical need, but spiritual need. What does it mean to be thirsty and poverty stricken? The most basic needs to be the persons God intends us to be are unavailable to us, yet offered in this invitation. Have you ever been thirsty? Parched for something to drink? Do you know that same desperation before the Lord, in our spiritual need?

The invitation is spoken along the lines of "Ho", a type of call that a street vendor would issue. It is a hawking sort of greeting, to rouse poverty-stricken people out of our stupor to open our eyes and know that something better is being offered, grabbing their attention. Isaiah intended to startle us out of our falsely satisfied stupor! The offer is for true satisfaction, true blessing beyond anything our poverty can begin to provide for ourselves. He doesn't promise ease of circumstances; he calls us to experience true satisfaction from his own hand.

Invited at Another's Expense!

Is this banquet free? No! There is a cost, but the miracle is that these people do not bear the cost of the banquet. Did you notice in verse 1, the price is somehow free to the one receiving the blessing. Our poverty is not a barrier to the blessings. In fact, it is our poverty that qualifies us to receive! This is not a solution to the problem of the proud one, the one who assumes he has everything he needs. This invitation comes to those who know their need, feel their need!

The cost is paid by the Servant. He is the payment, and he is the satisfaction. Think not of a soup kitchen sort of solution, a meager charity to help people survive. That is not Isaiah's image. His imagery is one of inviting beggars to a lavish meal spread before them, but one in which the price has already been paid by another! This is like a fantastic meal at your favorite restaurant that you enjoy because the bill is paid in full by someone else.

Let's make sure we get this. We are called to repent, to come to Jesus, the Servant, because the work to care for our souls has already been done. We are not called to come by working it out ourselves. By calculating the resources at our disposal to see if we are qualified to come to Christ. That is the picture Isaiah is challenging.

He wants us to know we DON'T have the resources we need. And he is calling us beggars anyway! This should shape the sort of community we have as a people, a collection of beggars. Jack Miller, founder of World Harvest Mission, says that sharing the gospel is one beggar telling another beggar where satisfaction can be found. That applies to us as a church, too. WE are a collection of beggars, not the qualified, not those who found Christ...but those Christ found! We have no room for spiritual pride here! The cross of Christ is the great leveler of mankind, where we all come and see that all alike are invited to God's grace.

Whatever your need. Your hunger. Your thirst. Whatever brokenness in your life. Come with your need and poverty. Come the first time, and keep coming to him, run to him. This life Isaiah calls us to live of repentance, is a life that isn't a "once and done" transaction. It is a lifestyle, one of continually being shown our need by our faithful Father, then running again and again to him for healing. Come.

II. Repent of our Alienation (3-5)

What is the food that is offered to the needy? We turn from the benefits of verses 1 and 2, and now turn in v. 3 to the source of the benefits, to God himself (v. 3). What began as a metaphor of coming to waters, coming to bread, is in reality a coming to God. The Lord satisfies our deepest longings as bread and water quench our physical thirst.

Verse 3: God promises an Everlasting covenant, love given to David. What does this mean? We have seen other covenants mentioned, and the promise to David is here mentioned as an everlasting covenant, that is a King to sit on the throne for all eternity.

He is saying I will bring you (plural, that is, US) into covenanted blessings, that is the promise of David (or David's line) ruling the world in an enduring throne. That eternal Son of David on the throne is none other than Jesus. God promises that we will forever be ruled by King Jesus, the gracious One, the Suffering Servant from chapter 53.

What specifically is covenanted, promised? Steadfast, sure love! This is the special Hebrew word for faithful, tenacious, love and mercy God has for his people.

OK, so let's put all this together. God is saying to spiritually poor people, those who have NO claim on him, no ability to demand his attention, this wild thing.

Come to me, you who have no resources, and I promise and covenant (a pledge of life and death) to love you with a fierce and secure love that you can't earn, and I will bring you into this family, this people, that will endure through all eternity with Jesus, the Son of David, ruling on the throne, in grace and kindness.

How's that for a promise to alienated people, to outsiders who have no right to family blessings.

Remember the Beatles song, "Money can't buy you love."? This is God's version. Money can't buy you anything that will have eternal value...but I've bought it for you with the covenanted price of the blood of the Lord Jesus. You can't buy love, but Jesus gave his life so that we are loved beyond our wildest imaginations!

So with this foundation of God's grace in mind, he says to us REPENT! verse 6 Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. The seeking is not the word of seeking something in knowledge that the thing is here. Seek him, because he is here. Turn to him, because of what he's done for you.

He is near, which is part of the family of words for family relationship, indicating a next of kin relationship. So seek him, because he stands as next of kin to any who seek him out! Turn to Jesus, away from wickedness that can't satisfy, because Jesus stands there to welcome us as our brother!

How do we often discipline our children, when they are disrespectful and ignore our instruction? If you are anything like me, then often you grow impatient. We get easily exasperated and sometimes use the "I told you" line. If they persist and bring calamity upon themselves, we may add, "I told you so."

But note how God treats his people. "Turn to me" he says, and reminds us of our family relationship. Turn away from your sin because you belong to me, I stand as close to you as your next of kin. I am your Father, he says. He woos us by his grace and love. He calls to us as a Father, grieving over children wandering. Not shouting in anger at us. Not impatiently tapping his foot waiting for our compliance. This is the same Father who in Luke 15 hikes up his robe and runs out to kiss up his son who returns. It is the love, grace and kindness of our Father that welcomes us into repentance! It is the blood of Jesus on the cross that covers

over our guilt. It is the renewing power of the Holy Spirit that breathes new life into us, so that we are not afraid to cry out for help!

Verse 7 helps us with a wonderful picture of exactly what the proper response of repentance looks like in light of all these wonderful promises of God.

Repentance is a two-sided thing. Do you see it in verse 7? It involves turning away from our wickedness and turning to the Lord. Some have considered repentance as turning from bad works to good works. That's not the Bible's picture at all. Repentance is turning away from our wickedness, not to good works, but to God himself, so that he will work the fruit of his life within us!

Others have made much about the fact that because of God's grace, "we come to Jesus just as we are." That is absolutely true, as I stated above. But here's the message of repentance. **We come to God just as we are,...but not so that we stay just as we are.** We come to Christ in order for his life to work within us to transform us from the inside out, to remake us, to renew us, to shape us, to purify us, to sanctify us, to change us. The Lord calls all kinds of people, each of us broken, to himself, with a grand purpose...bringing us freedom from the power of sin so that we live as we were designed and created to live! He gives us the Holy Spirit to enable repentance and new obedience. It is all of his grace and calling us to respond.

Underlying the beauty of this call to repentance is the reality that living a repentant life before our Father and others is the dynamic of brokenness and beauty. We realize we are broken messes, the chief of sinners as Paul says. But at the same time, we turn to God and realize that by the work of Jesus, we are saints before him.

The problem often is that we don't like this sort of dynamic in our souls. We'd rather convince ourselves and everyone else that we can handle it, not need to cry out to God for help. Because when we cry out, really cry out, we feel our powerlessness.

Here's the secret though. If we don't know of the powerlessness within ourselves, we won't really feel the power of Christ at work within us. If we can't turn away from our own resources to the supernatural resources available to God's children, then we will be trapped in the cycle essentially of self-worship.

And our lives will sound like blaming other people for our sin. "It's your fault. You did X and it made me do Y." When we blame other people for our sin, it is a clear cut sign that we are not genuinely repenting before God. When we seek to point at all the wrong everyone else is doing and not take responsibility before Jesus for our sin, then we aren't turning to Christ for salvation. We are trying to

be saved by the gospel of comparison. "At least I'm not as bad as them." And friends, there is no salvation in comparison.

This is not the message of the Bible. We turn to God AWAY from our sin and fight it! Not because we are good, but because the power of God courses through us. The Holy Spirit renews us to fight against the sin resident in our lives. Let's not give up the fight. He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world! We are no longer aliens, but have been placed in his family. He is at work to develop a family resemblance within us.

We are no longer alienated from our Father because of the work of Jesus. He is at work renewing us. Turn to him so that he brings change in and through your life and my life!

III. Repent of our Low Hopes for God.

Judah is left asking "Are you sure?" What is all this about exile? How does that relate to everlasting kingship of Christ? It is too ambitious for a nation that is a fractured people of God.

We so often come to God by limiting what he is able to do. We dream small because our view of God is small. What we expect he can do is small. What we HOPE for him to do is even small.

You may have experienced a relationship fall apart and your life is upside down and you wonder, what now? Do you still leave room for hope? Perhaps the relationship is not repairable for whatever reason. But are you leaving room to hope in God's mercy for you to be expressed in surprising and powerful ways? For him to do something far beyond what you can imagine?

Verses 8-9 are famous about God's ways and our ways, God's ways are higher. We think about these verses to give us hope in puzzling circumstances. This is partially what they are about. More to the context though... **puzzled over God's grace to us.** How and why is he so gracious to us even though we are rebels and are fractured in our rebellion? EVEN then, he pursues us his people in love. His people, **as a group**, are rebellious, but God still loves us. **His plans are to prosper us and bless us, in spite of ourselves. His ways are higher in that they are MERCIFUL!**

The confidence comes from the reality that the plans will shoot and blossom just as surely as rain pours on the ground (55:10). Nothing can frustrate or divert the plan of God. Verse 11 reminds us that His word, which created the universe, goes forth in the same power. It will not fail to do what he designs it to do, certainly as we think of his design to bless his people! **And his foundational design is to bless you and keep you safe for himself.**

Personally, let us continue to hope before God for his mercy to rain down on that neighbor who doesn't yet know him. Pray for the colleague at work whose life is falling apart. Pray for our own lives that may seem to be a mess at the moment, either by our doing, or by having been sinned against by someone else. Continue to hope in the astounding mercy of God, that if you've repented and given yourself to him, is absolutely, bedrock commitment for your good and blessing. Hope in his character and the wild and wonderful ways he will go about expressing it. Turn away from the grip of sin and all those false saviors that only pretend to give our life meaning: our wealth, our power, our success. Turn instead to the ever loving, faithful Christ, who will never fail to save us.

Friends, when I walked on that Great Wall of China, and looked back over the stone I'd walked, I was amazed. But looking up provided the far more beautiful vistas. Keep your eyes on Christ and where he's taking you, holding you close as a Father does to his smallest children. Trust in him, repent and keep repenting before him, and you are in for the ride of your life.