

“The Gospel according to Isaiah: Sin and Idolatry”

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What’s wrong with the world? A lot of people have opinions about what is wrong with the world. In our highly politicized environment, the quick answer might be, “Republicans,” or “Democrats.” Or, perhaps more specifically, people might say, “Donald Trump,” or “Nancy Pelosi,” depending on their political leanings. Bernie Sanders might say “corporate greed” or refer to the “one percent.” Others might not have a specific person or people group in mind, but they may refer to general problems, perhaps environmental ones like climate change or the amount of plastic in our oceans. Six years ago, Pope Francis said, “The most serious of the evils that afflict the world these days are youth unemployment and the loneliness of the old.”¹

What do you say? Perhaps you’re not worried about the whole world. Perhaps the question you would like to answer is, “What’s wrong with *my* world?” Your answer might be your health, or your spouse’s health, or a problematic relationship, or your boss, or not enough money, or someone or something else.

There’s a story that in the early twentieth century, *The Times* of London asked some prominent authors that question, “What’s wrong with the world?” As you can imagine, they received various answers. The shortest they receive was from the witty and insightful Catholic writer, G. K. Chesterton. His response was:

Dear Sirs,
I am.

Sincerely yours,
G. K. Chesterton²

Why would he write that? Just to be funny? No, Chesterton answered that way because he realized that the problem in the world wasn’t one outside of him. It wasn’t a matter of pointing the finger at someone else, or some other group of people. He realized that what was wrong with the world was something inside of him, and inside of everyone else, too.

¹ Eugenio Scalfari, “The Pope: How the Church Will Change,” *Repubblica*, October 1, 2013, https://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/10/01/news/pope_s_conversation_with_scalfari_english-67643118/?refresh_ce.

² Marva J. Dawn, “Not *What*, but *Who* Is the Matter with Preaching?” in *What’s the Matter with Preaching Today*, ed. Mike Graves (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 75.

Today, we're going to talk about what that something is. Last week, we started a teaching series that will run this month. We're looking at one book of the Bible, the second longest book (according to chapter numbers), a book from the Old Testament called Isaiah, named after one of the greatest prophets of Israel. Isaiah was given a job by God over twenty-seven hundred years ago: to tell the people of Israel to turn back to God, to tell them about punishment that would come upon them and the world because of sin, and to tell them a message of good news. One day, God's people will be delivered from all that is wrong with the world. There will healing for broken people and a broken world.

We'll look at various passages from the book of Isaiah today. We'll begin with Isaiah 5:1-7:

- ¹ Let me sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
- ² He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.
- ³ And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem
and men of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
- ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard,
that I have not done in it?
When I looked for it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?
- ⁵ And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
- ⁶ I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briars and thorns shall grow up;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, an outcry!³

This is the story of Israel, but it's also the story of the world. If you want to know a tip for how to understand the Bible, it's this: There are three big stories within the Bible. The first one is the story of the whole world. The Bible begins with God creating a world out of nothing, and it ends with God restoring that world, creating a new world that is perfect. Within that big story, there's another story, the story of Israel, which parallels that greater story. God called one old man, Abraham, and he told him that he would bless the whole world through him (Gen. 12:1–3). And that one old man and his old wife, Sarah, miraculously who had a child, who had children, who had children, who became Israel. And they ended up in Egypt, where they grew rapidly in number but became slaves. God rescued them from slavery by sending plagues upon Egypt, the greatest nation of the world at that time. And eventually he brought them into their own land.

In the passage that we just read, God poetically likens that land to a vineyard. He took a fertile ground, cleared out any stones, built a watchtower and a wine vat, and then he planted his vine in it. That's a way of saying he planted Israel in their own land, a good land. And the language of the vineyard echoes the language of the garden of Eden. In the beginning, God planted the first human beings in a fertile ground.

And what does God expect of his people? He expects them to bear good fruit. He expects them to live in a certain way. He expected them to worship him, to recognize his greatness and reflect that greatness to the world. He expected them to love him, to be thankful to him, and to obey him. He expected them to love because he is love. He expected them to live righteously, to do justice, to love their neighbors as they love themselves. God expected that of the first human beings. He expected that of Israel. And he expects that of us.

But the passage says that God looked for good fruit, for good grapes, and he only found bad fruit, sour, wild grapes. Again, this is a metaphor. The people of Israel were not living the

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

way they should. And just like God evicted Adam and Eve from his garden because they didn't live according to his terms, God was warning Israel that they would be evicted from their land if they didn't start living for God. And the reality is that Israel would be removed from their land, at least for a time. And this is our story, too. The reason that we sense problems in our world is that we have been removed from God's garden, from the paradise that he prepared for us. Humanity has been wandering in the wilderness for a long time. The world, *as it is*, is not our home. That's why we don't feel at home. Whether we realize it or not, what we really long for is to be back home, to be with God in the world as he intended it to be.

You may wonder, "What kind of bad fruit did Israel produce?" What does it look like to live contrary to God's expectations? Isaiah gives us a picture of that. Let's go to the first chapter in the book. Here is Isaiah 1:2–4:

- ² Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:
"Children have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.
- ³ The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand."
- ⁴ Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged.

The heart of living against God's design, the heart of what we call sin, is relational. We were made to have a relationship with God. And God says that the problem with Israel is that though they were his children and he raised them, they rebelled against them. Animals know their master, but Israel didn't know its own maker. In fact, God says that they despised him! Their failure to love God, to acknowledge God as Creator and King, led them to "deal corruptly."

Yet the Israelites thought that they could ignore God, fail to live for him, and then occasionally go through the religious motions, "worshiping" him. But God says that such worship is no worship at all. Look at Isaiah 1:12–17:

- 12 “When you come to appear before me,
 who has required of you
 this trampling of my courts?
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.
14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts
 my soul hates;
 they have become a burden to me;
 I am weary of bearing them.
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.
16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
 remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
 cease to do evil,
17 learn to do good;
 seek justice,
 correct oppression;
 bring justice to the fatherless,
 plead the widow’s cause.

Israel tried to do their religious business as usual, bringing their offerings to God, observing their festivals, praying to God. But God says that he hates their festivals and though they pray to him, he will not listen. Their hands are full of blood! Why? It seems that they were doing evil instead of good. They were oppressing people who were vulnerable. Israel had laws in place to care for orphans and widows, and apparently the people were not obeying those laws. There’s a famous verse, Isaiah 29:13, where God says,

... this people draw near with their mouth
 and honor me with their lips,
 while their hearts are far from me,
 and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.

God doesn’t want mere lip service. God wants our hearts. And if we love him, we will obey him.

Now look at verses 21–23:

- 21 How the faithful city
 has become a whore,
 she who was full of justice!
 Righteousness lodged in her,

- but now murderers.
- ²² Your silver has become dross,
your best wine mixed with water.
- ²³ Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,
and the widow's cause does not come to them.

That's some tough talk. Why is Israel called a whore? Because she hasn't been faithful to God. The relationship between God and his people is likened to a marriage. God's people are supposed to love God and be faithful to him. That means that they shouldn't worship other gods. When they failed to acknowledge who God truly is, when they failed to make him the most important thing in their lives, the object of their worship, the one who determines how they live, then they were cheating on God. They did not do justice. Their leaders were corrupt, bought and sold, being bribed. Instead of observing the laws about the orphan and the widow, they oppressed those vulnerable people. Later, God, will say that the leaders "devoured the vineyard" (Isa. 3:14) and "crush[ed] my people, by grinding the face of the poor" (Isa. 3:15).

In chapter 5 of Isaiah, after that passage about the vineyard that we read earlier, we're told that people "join[ed] house to house" and "field to field," probably by taking properties away from the poor (Isa. 5:8). Israel had laws that required debt forgiveness at various times, and those laws were probably ignored. People rose "early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink" (Isa. 5:11). The Bible doesn't prohibit drinking alcohol, but it does prohibit getting drunk, which causes someone to lose control. That chapter also features these words, in found in Isaiah 5:20–23:

- ²⁰ Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!
- ²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and shrewd in their own sight!
- ²² Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,
and valiant men in mixing strong drink,
- ²³ who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of his right!

What was true then is true now: we often mistake what is good for evil, and what is evil for good. Our standard of what is good and evil should be God. Our knowledge of what is good and evil is often found in our conscience, but we can't rely on our own moral compasses, because they are often not working correctly. Our knowledge of good and evil should come from the Bible, but we often ignore it. We think we know better than God.

That kind of ignoring of God, and thinking that we know better than God, is rebellion against him. Isaiah 29:16 says

You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,
that the thing made should say of its maker,
“He did not make me”;
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
“He has no understanding”?

God has made us. We are the clay, and he is the potter. But our tendency is to get things backwards. We make God in our image, and we reject the true God. We don't trust that he is wiser than we are.

But God issues this warning to his “clay.” This is Isaiah 45:9–10:

- ⁹ “Woe to him who strives with him who formed him,
a pot among earthen pots!
Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’
or ‘Your work has no handles?’
¹⁰ Woe to him who says to a father, ‘What are you begetting?’
or to a woman, ‘With what are you in labor?’ ”

There's much more that can be said about our sin against God, and our rebellion against him. But this talk of clay and the potter leads to something else that's at the heart of sin. Earlier, I said that the heart of sin is a relational problem. We don't love and honor God as we should. Because of that, we don't pay attention to him and we don't obey him—certainly not as we should. And all of that leads to something else that's at the heart of our sin, our rebellion against God. And that is idolatry.

Idolatry is making something other than God, something that is created, not the Creator, something finite, not infinite, something that had a beginning, not something eternal, and making that thing the center of our lives. An idol is a false god. It's whatever we love the most. It's what we trust will make us happy, complete, whole. It's what we think will give us comfort and

security. We don't have to think of it as an object of worship. We probably don't think of it as a god. But whatever is at the center of our lives is our god. We were made to worship. We inherently religious. And if we fail to worship the true God, someone or something else will fill that void.

Isaiah has one of the classic passages about idolatry. Turn to Isaiah 44:9–20:

⁹ All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. ¹⁰ Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? ¹¹ Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified; they shall be put to shame together.

¹² The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. ¹³ The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. ¹⁴ He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵ Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. ¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" ¹⁷ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!"

¹⁸ They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. ¹⁹ No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" ²⁰ He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

This passage points out the foolishness of idolatry. It imagines something fashioning a piece of wood into some kind of statue or figure of a false god. Half of the food is used for fuel, for warmth and to bake bread. And then they take the other half and make a god to worship, saying "deliver me" to it. This is what idolatry is like.

Now, many people today would conclude that people in the ancient world were just foolish. How stupid can you be to worship something like that? But we're not really different.

Years ago, I saw a video clip of a comedian on one of the late-night talk shows, and he was saying we have the greatest technology ever, and it's wasted on the worst generation ever. He said that we're always complaining about our phones. If you have a smart phone, you have one of the most amazing pieces of technology ever, a little computer, camera, and phone that can do what previous generations never thought possible. And what's it made out of? Plastic, glass, some bits of metal. When the phone works, you can become glued to it. We put our faith in technology to make our lives better, to deliver us. But what if it stops working? Then it's just a bit of trash. The thing we'll pay hundreds of dollars for now will be useless later.

That's sort of what Isaiah is getting at here. It's foolish to make something that will later be junk the center of your life, because the reality is it's not a smart phone. It's dumb. It has no personality, no will. It didn't design and make itself. It didn't create the world and it can't remake it. It can't save you. It can't deliver you from your greatest problem, which is, in the words of Isaiah, "your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear" (Isa. 59:2).

We make idols because we can control them. We are their potter, and they are our clay. We don't want to come under God's authority. We want to be gods. Idols make demands on us, but we somehow think those demands are not as hard as God's. Instead of realizing that God's yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matt. 11:30), we think there's an easier way, a better way. But it's not better. God allows us to go after those idols, but they don't lead to salvation. They lead to death.

All of that is bad news. Yes, there is a problem in the world, and that problem isn't just outside of us, it's in us. We're part of the problem. So, how do we fix it?

Part of the problem is that we can't fix the problem. Isaiah 64:5–6 says

Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

We can't save ourselves. We are unclean, tainted by the power of sin, by the folly of idolatry. Even our best acts, the ones we consider righteous, are polluted by sin. We do good things often for selfish reasons, not to honor God. So, if we can't fix the problem, who can?

The good news is that God can, and, if we turn to God, he will. Earlier, we read some verses from the first chapter of Isaiah. I intentionally left out a few. Here is what Isaiah 1:18–20 says:

- 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.
¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

God promised Israel that he would make them clean. He would make them “white as snow,” “like wool.” He would remove their sins. But they had to be willing. They had to repent. This salvation is offered freely. It’s a gift that must be received in faith. Isaiah 55:1–7 says,

- ¹ “Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
³ Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
⁴ Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
⁵ Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,
and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.
⁶ “Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;
⁷ let the wicked forsake his way,

and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Isaiah says, “Come and eat, come and drink. You don’t need money! Do this and live. Seek God while he can be found. If you do this, forsaking your wicked ways, God will have compassion on you. He will forgive your sins.”

How does God cleanse unclean people from their sin? Why does he forgive them? How is it that this offer is free, without price?

The answer is Jesus. I’ll say much more about him over the next two weeks. We’ll hear that he is the promised child who would be born, the Son who is also God (Isa. 9:6–7). As the Son of God, Jesus has always existed, but over two thousand years ago, he became a human being. This is the miracle of Christmas: God became man (without ceasing to be God). The third story of the Bible, the one that fulfills those other stories, is about Jesus. Jesus became a man so that he could fulfill God’s plans for humanity. He does what we should do but don’t. He always loved, honored, and worshiped God the Father. He had no idols. He wasn’t polluted by sin. Yet though he was perfect, he was treated like a criminal, like the worst of rebels. He died on a cross, an instrument of shame, torture, and death. This wasn’t an accident. It was God’s plan to punish sin. Jesus takes the punishment that we all deserve. He takes the death penalty for sin away from all who seek him, who turn to him in faith, who are willing to put away their idols and their wicked ways and follow him. This is all a gift. We don’t need to clean ourselves up first or earn this from God. We simply have to receive it in faith, trusting that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and that he has done everything needed to put us back into a right relationship with God.

I’ll say more about him over the next two weeks. And I’ll say more about God’s plans to restore the world at the end of the month. But I do want to say now that Isaiah foresaw a day when people would cast away their idols. After Isaiah called Israel “a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the LORD” (Isa. 30:9), he said,

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you,
and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.
For the Lord is a God of justice;
blessed are all those who wait for him (Isa. 30:18).

And he says to those who come to God, “Then you will defile your carved idols overlaid with silver and your gold-plated metal images. You will scatter them as unclean things. You will say to them, ‘Be gone!’” (Isa. 30:22).

Isaiah also told of a day when the world would become a garden again, when the “wilderness becomes a fruitful field” (Isa. 32:15). He predicted that a new creation would come, where God’s people “shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit” (Isa. 65:21). He predicted that God’s people would go back home, to be with God in a perfect world.

The only way back to God and that world is Jesus. I urge us all to trust in him, to know more about him, to know more about the Bible, which is his word. You can do that by reading all of Isaiah for yourself. This sermon and the other sermons in this series will be on our website, at wbcommunity.org/isaiah. You can find links to some great videos about the book, made by The Bible Project. All of us can know about the one true God. The clay can truly know its potter. The question is whether or not we are willing. As far as it is within your power, seek God while he can be found.