

**EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH**

**SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2021**

**SERMON: LENT: COMING TO TERMS WITH THE "WHY?"**

**TEXT: ISAIAH 1:10-20**

**A husband and his wife were in their kitchen. The husband was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper while his wife was preparing a ham for dinner. The husband watched the wife cut off about one inch from either end of the ham. He asked why she cut the end off, proclaiming "that's a waste of good ham!" She said "that's the way my mom prepared the ham." The husband asked "why did your mom cut the ends off?" The wife didn't know.**

**Later, the wife called her mom to find out why she cut the ends of the ham off. Her mom said "because that was the way my mom prepared ham."**

**The wife's grandma passed away several years earlier, but her Grandpa was still living. She called her Grandpa and asked "Grandpa, why did Grandma cut the ends off of the ham?" He was silent as he thought for a moment. Then he replied, "so the ham could fit in the baking pan."**

As a Christian, what is your motive for doing what you do for God? Why do you participate in the rituals, habits, and traditions that you do that you would consider "good" or "Christian." Many of the things we do are actually what could be called "cultural/religious training."

On this, the fourth Sunday of Lent, we want to search our hearts and come to terms with why we do the "good things" that we do for Jesus. Do we truly know what the motives are behind our actions.

Let's start with our scripture lesson: Isaiah 1:10-20:

**<sup>10</sup> Listen to the LORD, you leaders of "Sodom."**

**Listen to the law of our God, people of "Gomorrah."**

**<sup>11</sup> "What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?"**

**says the LORD.**

**"I am sick of your burnt offerings of rams  
and the fat of fattened cattle.**

**I get no pleasure from the blood  
of bulls and lambs and goats.**

**<sup>12</sup> When you come to worship me,  
who asked you to parade through my courts with all your  
ceremony?**

**<sup>13</sup> Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts;  
the incense of your offerings disgusts me!**

**As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath  
and your special days for fasting—  
they are all sinful and false.**

**I want no more of your pious meetings.**

**<sup>14</sup> I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals.  
They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them!**

**<sup>15</sup> When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look.  
Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen,  
for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.**

**<sup>16</sup> Wash yourselves and be clean!  
Get your sins out of my sight.  
Give up your evil ways.**

**<sup>17</sup> Learn to do good.  
Seek justice.**

**Help the oppressed.  
Defend the cause of orphans.  
Fight for the rights of widows.**

**<sup>18</sup> "Come now, let's settle this,"  
says the LORD.**

**"Though your sins are like scarlet,  
I will make them as white as snow.  
Though they are red like crimson,  
I will make them as white as wool.**

**<sup>19</sup> If you will only obey me,**

**you will have plenty to eat.**  
**<sup>20</sup> But if you turn away and refuse to listen,**  
**you will be devoured by the sword of your enemies.**  
**I, the LORD, have spoken!"**

Isaiah is at the beginning of his prophetic ministry. He has been called by God in a dramatic fashion to give the people of Judah and those in Jerusalem, the Holy City, a message calling them stop rebelling against God and come back to Him!

How should the people stop rebelling? Isaiah gives them two options – the wrong and the right way! The wrong way is described in 1:10-15 and is saying that the people could try to appease God by going through the motions of religiousness, the rituals that they are used to doing in the temple that they doesn't change their attitudes or heart. The right way, described in 1:16-17, would be actually repenting and changing how they live.

Verses 18-20 wrap up the section by summing up the situation. If we take the right way, we will enjoy blessings; if we take the wrong way, we will be destroyed!

The people of Israel suffered over and over with delusions of grandeur! They wrongly interpreted their standing before God. The people of Israel think they are immune from judgment because they are "The Children of Israel...the sons and daughters of Abraham!" There must be some benefit to being God's "chosen people!" The reality they have forgotten is the fact that if their behaviour is no different than the world's behaviour, their fate will be no different!

We get so annoyed today with the expressions of entitlement that we see. Several years ago, we had a meal for the community once a week at the downtown Victoria Ave building. 99% of the people who came to the meal were very appreciative that we would take the time to put on the meal, but

you ran into that 1%, every now and then, that felt entitled. They would complain and complain that they weren't getting something someone else received or that something wasn't fair, or even complain that we served something they didn't like or couldn't eat. "Entitlement" has been around for a long time.

The people of Judah felt that if they fulfilled all the religious rituals more carefully that God would stop the prophesied judgement and would bless them.

What was God's response? Everything they were doing to try to appease Him was worthless. He doesn't want their sacrifices, their incense, their festivals, their gifts... he doesn't want any of it and considers it all an abomination in His sight. He even mocks them with by saying, "Why are you doing these things? I didn't ask you to do them?" Being more religious will not find favour with God!

Why won't this work? The message comes as a "double entendre" or a "dual message." God tells the people that "their hands are full of blood!" (v.15). To the people, they might think that God is talking about the blood of the sacrifices they give at the temple, but God is talking about the blood of the innocent lives that they have abused and mistreated.

Isaiah answers a question that I seen frequently and occasionally asked to answer..."Does God even stop listening to the prayers of His people?" The answer in Isaiah 1 would be "Yes!" God will not hear their prayers because their prayers are not matched by godly lives! The people were wanting God's blessing while at the same time they were destroying the lives of others.

Anyone can learn to say or do what is considered the "right" actions. The real righteous person is the one who has entered a life-changing relationship with Jesus and that is clearly what is required by God!

## **FOR US TODAY**

The first thing we really need to do is realize that God cannot be manipulated! This statement makes perfect sense, but yet we still try to do it! We pride ourselves in “looking religious” or making something look “religious” and we generally go through these rituals for our own benefit! Whether we do it consciously or unconsciously, we believe that our actions can force God to do certain things.

Our sense of “religious” entitlement often makes us forget that nothing that we do here on earth requires God to do anything. If that is the case, then we ask the question “WHY?” Why do we do things if it doesn’t matter? Why treat the poor justly and help those who can’t help themselves?

Isaiah would tell the Israelites, “Because God required it in his covenant with them!” If they were to experience the blessings their covenant Lord offered, then they had to agree to treat one another in ethical ways.

Why? Because it is God’s will expressed through character. If God’s people wanted to walk with Him, they had to agree to act like Him.

In the New Testament, the new covenant which is written on our hearts, calls us to share the character of God.

The people of Isaiah’s day had to be reminded that the rituals, the offerings and the sacrifices, that they would do in the temple was not meant to be used to gain God’s favour. The sacrifices were offered up by a people who had already accepted God’s grace and now were being obedient to the will of God. The people were violating God’s grace horribly by using the system to cover up the fact that they regularly and intentionally broke and violated God’s covenant with them.

Why should we act religiously? It is meant to show our where our hearts are truly at. Just like we describe the symbols of Baptist...an outward sign of an

inward change! If you are purposefully rebelling against God in your daily life, no number of sacrifices would save you.

Psalm 51:16-17 clearly tells us...

***16 You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one.***

***You do not want a burnt offering.***

***17 The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit.***

***You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.***

Why were the sacrifices required? They were a way for us as humans to symbolically show a spiritual reality. When the symbol takes the place of the reality it becomes sin.

At the end of our scripture, once again we see that God is a God of restoration and hope! Verse 18 is probably the best-known verse in this section. I remember learning a short chorus written by blind musician Ken Medema in the 70's and I am going to invite Al to come up and we are going to sing it together:

*Come, let us reason together,  
That's what God says.  
Come, let us reason together,  
Says the Lord.*

*Tho' your sins be as scarlet,  
They shall be as white as snow;  
Thro' they be red as crimson,  
They shall be as wool.*

Some people are surprised to learn that Christianity is primarily a way of life that should have a foundation of faith and reason and not emotions. Your Christian life should be steeped in reason and logic that in turn brings you joy unspeakable. I have heard people argue that "even though the Bible says this...I don't care...this is how I feel. Feelings have a bad habit of taking precedence over truth, especially in our world today.

To bring restoration to a sinful world, Isaiah introduces the vocabulary of a legal trial. When you translate a foreign language, the decisions made can sometimes take away from the intended meaning...it can become lost in translation. "Come let us reason..." is probably not strong enough language. What God is wanting us to bring our best thinking as if we were defending ourselves in a court of law. We are being challenged to weigh the pro's and con's of our choices. If one way of living brings destruction and another way of living brings forgiveness and restoration. Which decision makes the most sense? Drop the emotion and use your God-given reason!

## **LIFE APPLICATION**

How do you see your religious life and actions? Does part of you, great or small, believe that by going to church regularly, reading your Bibles, you pray, give money regularly, and you don't "drink, smoke, or chew, or go with woman who do!" means that you have some preferential "in" with God. That God owes you? Do we actually become the pharisee who praise loudly and proudly that "God, you should be thankful that you have someone like me in your corner!" Then trials come and we get angry at God and accuse him of being unfair when we have done so much for him!

What is of primary importance to God? As the Old and New Testament tell us, God wants us to surrender our lives to Him and be obedient. That obedience will become the good works that others see.

It is easy to look like we are obedient when in reality we are totally self-centered.

During Lent take the time to examine your actions and attitudes. God says we must show evidence of the change brought to us in our lives.