

This morning, I am continuing in a sermon series that I am calling “The gospel according to Isaiah” which is taking us through much of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah was what was known as a covenant mediator prophet, people who were called by God to be His spokesperson, to call out the sin of the nation and call them to repent of their sin and return to faithfulness to the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai, after He had led them out of Egypt. Isaiah prophesied to Judah, the southern part of Israel, from about 740-687 BC. The book of Isaiah can be broken up into two parts. Chapters 1-39 are mainly about God’s judgment of Israel and the surrounding nations for their sins. Chapters 40-66 are mainly about the restoration God will bring to His people once their time of discipline is completed.

This morning, we will be in chapter 59, a chapter which looks once again at the theme of the sin that leads to exile and brokenness and how God will solve the problem. It is a passage that is particularly timely as we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent.

**Isaiah 59:1–21** - Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. <sup>2</sup> But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. <sup>3</sup> For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken falsely, and your tongue mutters wicked things. <sup>4</sup> No one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies; they conceive trouble and **give birth to evil**. <sup>5</sup> They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider’s web. Whoever eats their eggs will die, and when one is broken, an adder is hatched. <sup>6</sup> Their cobwebs are useless for clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their deeds are evil deeds, and acts of violence are in their hands. <sup>7</sup> Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. They pursue evil schemes; acts of violence mark their ways. <sup>8</sup> The way of peace they do not know; there is **no justice in their paths**. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks along them will know peace. <sup>9</sup> So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. <sup>10</sup> Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like people without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong, we are like the dead. <sup>11</sup> We all growl like bears; we moan **mournfully like doves**. We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away. <sup>12</sup> For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities: <sup>13</sup> rebellion and treachery against the Lord, turning our backs on our God, inciting revolt and oppression, uttering lies our hearts have conceived. <sup>14</sup> So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at

a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, **honesty cannot enter**.<sup>15</sup> Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice.<sup>16</sup> He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.<sup>17</sup> He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in **zeal as in a cloak**.<sup>18</sup> According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands their due.<sup>19</sup> From the west, people will fear the name of the Lord, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory. For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the Lord drives along.<sup>20</sup> “The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,” declares the Lord.<sup>21</sup> “As for me, this is my covenant with them,” **says the Lord**. “My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever,” says the Lord.

Isaiah begins in verse 1 asking the question that has come up often throughout this book – **why are things so bad in the world, even with God’s people? Is God not powerful enough? Or does He not care?** According to Isaiah, the problem is not with God; the problem with the world is sin; as he says in verse 2, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” God has not changed, but we have done something to bring a divide between us and God.

### **1) The problem of sin**

He continues through verse 11 to give numerous examples of sin – lying, evil speech, a lack of justice and integrity, acts of violence, the shedding of innocent blood, a lack of peace. He concludes by saying in verse 10, “Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like people without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong, we are like the dead.” Even though it may be physically light outside, we may as well be blind for how we are living our lives, stumbling through and making a mess of things.

Isaiah uses three words for sin in this passage. The first word he uses is **peshah** – transgression, **rebellion against God**, departure from God – you know what is right but you do the wrong thing knowingly. The second word is **chattach** – **falling short of a mark** (archery). It’s not necessarily willful rebellion, just not measuring up to the standard. Think of commands such as “be perfect, as my Father is

perfect” or “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind” – you don’t necessarily mean to disobey those, you just can’t fulfill them perfectly. The third is **hawon** – **corrupt, twisted, crooked in one’s being**. Again, this isn’t willful disobedience or falling short of a mark; it’s more of an inward state, that we are at our very core corrupt, twisted, and crooked. Therefore, the things we do come out of a twisted, corrupt character. And this is critical, because the truth is that we are not sinners because we commit sinful acts; rather, we commit sinful acts because we are sinners. We are blind, spiritually speaking, and so we stumble and make a mess of things.

According to the Bible, the main problem with the world is sin, something that entered the world when the first humans were deceived by the devil and willfully disobeyed God’s commands, seeking the knowledge, ability and honor that belongs to God alone.

**Romans 5:12** - Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned

It is this sin that caused the death and decay we see around us. This view is that the main problem is not a lack of education, or the wrong political leaders or system, or the wrong economic system. The problem is not a lack of information or knowledge. The problem is so much deeper. **It is what Isaiah said in verse 2:** “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”

Because of our sin, there is brokenness between us and God, between us and each other, between us and nature, and between us and ourselves. We have been separated from God, and we are trying desperately to fill the void with something that will make us feel better about ourselves, give our lives meaning, and a love that will never leave. But no person, or career, or cause, can fill that void. And no amount of trying to justify or excuse ourselves will truly make us right with God, ourselves, or anyone else.

In Tim Keller’s book *The Reason for God*, he tells the following story:

Andrew Delbanco is a humanities professor at Columbia University. Some years ago he was doing research on Alcoholics Anonymous and was attending AA meetings around the country. One Saturday morning in a New York City church basement he was listening to a “crisply dressed young man” who was talking about his problems. In his narrative he was absolutely flawless. All his mistakes were

due to the injustice and betrayals of others. He spoke of how he was going to avenge himself on all who had wronged him. “His every gesture gave the impression of grievously wounded pride,” Delbanco wrote. It was clear that the young man was trapped in his need to justify himself, and that things could only get worse and worse in his life until he recognized this. While he was speaking, a black man in his forties, in dreadlocks and dark shades, leaned over to Delbanco and said, “I used to feel that way too, before I achieved low self-esteem.” Delbanco wrote later in his book, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*: “This was more than a good line. For me it was the moment I understood in a new way the religion I had claimed to know something about. As the speaker bombarded us with phrases like ‘got to take control of my life,’ and ‘I’ve got to really believe in myself’ – the man beside me took refuge in the old Calvinist doctrine that pride is the enemy of hope. What he meant by his joke about self-esteem was that he learned no one can save himself by dint of his own efforts. He thought the speaker was still lost – lost in himself, but without knowing it.” By “low self-esteem,” the man in the dreadlocks did not mean the young man should come to hate himself. He meant that the well-dressed young man was “lost in himself” until he could admit he was a very flawed human being, a sinner. He would never be liberated to see his own flaws in their true light, to forgive those who had wronged him, or to humbly seek and receive forgiveness from others.

The whole point of sin is not so you just feel miserable about yourself. It is to free you up from the need to justify yourself, to excuse your behavior, to rationalize and blameshift so that you can feel better about yourself. It is to allow you to face the truth about yourself, that you might receive the undeserved, amazing grace, love and forgiveness of God. It is, as the 12-step movement puts it in the first step, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.”

I love how it was put in the great book of Puritan prayers, *The Valley of Vision*:

“Searcher of hearts,  
It is a good day to me when thou givest me  
A glimpse of myself;  
Sin is my greatest evil,  
But thou art my greatest good;  
I have cause to loathe myself,  
And not to seek self-honour,  
For no one desires to commend his own dunghill  
My country, family, church

Fare worse because of my sins”

That last line always haunts me. Read it carefully. He is not saying “My country, family, church fare worse because of me” like George Bailey in “It’s a Wonderful Life” saying “Everyone would be better off if I had never been born.” This is not some cry for pity and sympathy, as if we are looking for people to tell us that we’re a good person. No, this is an honest and true admission that our sin has terrible consequences, not just for us but for those around us.

I began serving this church as pastor in 2006 at the age of 30. I did such a stellar job that after only a couple of years, we made the decision to hire an outside mediator to come in because I had made such a mess of things as the pastor with regards to the leadership. My sins – particularly my struggle to deal well with conflict and my poor communication – threatened to destroy this church and my family. People left the church wounded because of my poor leadership. And while we made it through that time by the grace of God, that last line still holds true: **my country, family, church fare worse because of my sins**. You all have no idea how many times my wife has had to pick herself up off the mat and out of her sacrificial love for God, for me and for this church, continue to serve, never looking for recognition or honor. **Sometimes I look back at my journal from that time so I won’t forget**. My country, family, church fare worse because of my sins.

Why does Isaiah keep coming back to the reality of sin and its devastating consequences on our relationship with God, each other, ourselves, and the world around us? Because it is true, and because it is the pathway to salvation and grace. Jesus tells us that “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” referring to our sin. Blessed are those who understand the depth of their sin, who see the destruction it has caused in their own life and in the lives of others, and who do not just acknowledge it but grieve it, who are moved to tears by it, and who ultimately are brought to repentance and reconciliation as they confess their sins and vow to be different and come empty to God in order to be filled with His Spirit and power.

## **2) The lifeline of confession**

**Isaiah 59:12-14** - For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities: <sup>13</sup> rebellion and treachery against the Lord, turning our backs on our God, inciting revolt and oppression, uttering lies our hearts have conceived. <sup>14</sup> So justice is

driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, **honesty cannot enter**.

I regularly do marriage counseling, and one the most important goals in marriage counseling is to encourage spouses to resist the urge to get defensive or to argue back, but to truly listen when their spouse tells them how something they have done has hurt them. As uncomfortable as it might make you, as much as it might hurt, do not look away. Do not rationalize, do not minimize, do not blame-shift or explain it away, but listen humbly until you understand the depth of how your sin has affected the one you love. Why? So that everyone might know that everything is your fault? No. So that there might be repentance and reconciliation and peace. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Confession is the way out of sin, the pathway to peace. Look your sin full in the face this morning and do not look away. It was your anger, your greed, your lust that has harmed the ones you love. It was your abuse, your affair, that damaged your spouse, that wounded your children. It was your abortion that caused the death of that unborn child. It is your cruel words and actions that hurt your siblings, your friends. It is your disobedience of God that has kept others from knowing Him more. Do not minimize it this morning. Do not rationalize it, blame-shift, or explain it away. Feel the full weight of what you have done, the evil you have inflicted on others, the abuse, the neglect, the betrayal, the hurt, until it breaks your heart. This is more than confession; this is a sober-minded, gut-wrenching comprehension of what your sin has done to yourself, to others, to Jesus. Trust Jesus when He says that blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

**1 John 1:8–9** - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

**2 Corinthians 7:8–10** - Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—<sup>9</sup> yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. <sup>10</sup> Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

According to Paul, there is a worldly sorrow that leads to death, but there is godly sorrow that leads to repentance and salvation and leaves no regret. Worldly sorrow is just despair over our brokenness and the brokenness of this world, but there is no

solution. No forgiveness, no grace, no hope, no comfort. But Godly sorrow, a sorrow that comes from truly seeing the depth of our sin and the reality of what it has done to our lives, to the lives of others, and most importantly to God, leads us to repent, to change, to resolve not to be different, to be the man or woman God has called us to be, and ultimately to find God's comfort and salvation.

The recovery movement gets this. Consider step 4-7 of the 12 steps: We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings"

**Psalm 139:23-24** - Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. <sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting

Confess your sins to the Lord. I am guilty. I will own what I have done, without excuse. I will not blame others or my circumstances or my upbringing. I will clean up my side of the street.

### 3) The gift of redemption

**Isaiah 59:15-21** - Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. <sup>16</sup> He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. <sup>17</sup> He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.

<sup>18</sup> According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands their due. <sup>19</sup> From the west, people will fear the name of the Lord, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory. For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the Lord drives along. <sup>20</sup> "The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins," declares the Lord. <sup>21</sup> "As for me, this is my covenant with them," says the Lord. "My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever," says the Lord.

The answer to the problems of this world will not ultimately be found in education, politics, economic systems, or anything else. No one could save themselves, no



one could bring justice, and so God came to save and to judge. This is what Christmas is all about – God coming to save the world.

**Matthew 1:20–23** - But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

**John 3:16–18** - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.

God Himself would come to destroy the enemy, Satan, and rescue us.

**Hebrews 2:14–15** - Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—<sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

As he says in verse 20: “The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,” declares the Lord.

Salvation is offered to those with “low self-esteem,” those who are humble enough to confess their sins and turn from them to trusting in Jesus. This has always been the answer to our sin problem:

**Acts 2:37–38** - When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” <sup>38</sup> Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

He will make a new covenant with those who believe:



**Isaiah 59:21** - “As for me, this is my covenant with them,” **says the Lord**. “My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever,” says the Lord.

God Himself will live in us by His Holy Spirit, a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance of eternal life.

**Ephesians 1:13–14** - And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup> who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

If you do not know Jesus, let today be the day that you come to Him as Savior and Lord.

*Jesus, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God. I believe that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. I believe that apart from faith in you, I will die in my sins, separated from God for all eternity. But I believe that you love me so much that you died on the cross in my place, taking the penalty for my sin, and that you rose from the grave, conquering death. I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I believe in you as my Savior and Lord. Amen.*

And if you do know Him, let these words from the Valley of Vision be true:

Grant me never to lose sight of  
 The exceeding sinfulness of sin  
 The exceeding righteousness of salvation,  
 The exceeding glory of Christ,  
 The exceeding beauty of holiness,  
 The exceeding wonder of grace.

Do not be afraid to stop justifying yourself and to take a fearless and searching moral inventory. Not so that you might be in despair, but so that you might walk through honest confession and find the amazing grace and love of our God.