

Principles for Life

Isaiah 66

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This morning we move to the last chapter of Isaiah and wrap up our study of this lengthy but power-packed prophetic book. Like you, I have been surprised by the practical nature of what we have been learning. As we reach chapter 66, we are given what I believe are five principles that have been enumerated throughout the book of Isaiah.

These are practical life principles that will lead us to wise living. These five principles will serve as a great conclusion to our study of the book that is called the “Gospel in the Old Testament.”

In verses 1 & 2 we read,

This is what the LORD says:

“Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
Could you build me a temple as good as that?
Could you build me such a resting place?
² My hands have made both heaven and earth;
they and everything in them are mine.
I, the LORD, have spoken!
“I will bless those who have humble and contrite hearts,
who tremble at my word.

The Lord reminds the people that He is bigger than the temple. He is bigger than the world as we see it. Here is our first principle for life.

1. **It is the Humble rather than the Talented that are esteemed by the Lord**

Of course, this is just the opposite of the way our world looks at things. We esteem the powerful, we reward the talented (athletes, musicians, actors, inventors, and innovators). We look to the rich and powerful for guidance.

Perhaps there was a certain sense of pride at the magnificence of the former temple and a desire to show God their devotion by getting to work on making something extraordinary again. But God gives them perspective. It is as if He says, “I build worlds, and you want me to be impressed with, and bless you because you have presented me with your Legos.”

It is true, isn't it? We attempt big things for God because we hope it will result in God being proud of us and grateful to us for our efforts. It is a good thing to pursue excellence. However, we should pursue excellence not to gain something from God . . . but to present it to GOD as a fitting response to His Lordship. We don't present our works to God in the hope of getting a

reward from Him . . . we present our efforts to God as an expression of gratitude for what we have already received by His hand of mercy.

God says He is not impressed with the talented, He is impressed with those who realize how far short they fall of God's holiness and perfection. Those who are the most richly talented often have a hard time seeing their indebtedness to the Lord. They tend to trust their talent, intellect, or their personality rather than Him.

The humble and contrite are those who tremble before the Word of God. They allow it to serve as a searchlight for the soul. Throughout the course of history there have been some great revivals or "awakenings" where there was a great spiritual hunger and responsiveness to God. Listen to this description of one of the great revivals. These characteristics are true of every genuine work of God in reviving His people.

"It was a common thing, as soon as the Bible was opened, after the preliminary services, and just as the reader began"—here, you will observe, it was the simple reading of the Word without preaching; yet such was the power upon the minds of the people, that "it was a common thing, as soon as the Bible was opened, after the preliminary services, and just as the reader began, for *great meltings* to come upon the hearers. The deepest attention was paid to every word as the sacred verses were slowly and solemnly enunciated. Then the silent tear might be seen stealing down the rugged but expressive faces turned upon the reader.... It was often a stirring sight to witness the multitudes assembling during the dark winter evenings—to trace their progress as they came in all directions across moors and mountains by the blazing torches which they carried to light their way to the places of meeting. The Word of the Lord was precious in those days; and personal inconvenience was little thought of when the hungry soul sought to be satisfied."¹

What we learn from this is that a humble person comes to God's Word eager to be instructed. As we hunger to know and follow God's Word, we will find that humility that God honors.

This is only the first principle, the second I see in verses 3 & 4

³ But those who choose their own ways—
 delighting in their detestable sins—
 will not have their offerings accepted.
 When such people sacrifice a bull,
 it is no more acceptable than a human sacrifice.
 When they sacrifice a lamb,
 it's as though they had sacrificed a dog!
 When they bring an offering of grain,
 they might as well offer the blood of a pig.

¹ Charles J. Brown, in *The Revival of Religion: Addresses by Scottish Evangelical Leaders Delivered in Glasgow in 1840* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984 reprint), pp. 316, 317. Italics added.

When they burn frankincense,
 it's as if they had blessed an idol.
⁴ I will send them great trouble—
 all the things they feared.
 For when I called, they did not answer.
 When I spoke, they did not listen.
 They deliberately sinned before my very eyes
 and chose to do what they know I despise.”

2. It is the Responsive rather than the Religious who are blessed by the Lord

This is similar to the first principle, but it is enough different to warrant an independent principle. The people thought, their religious good deeds would lead to God's blessing. The same attitude can be seen today. Religious practices (which today would be: go to church, read the Bible, give generously, and listen to Christian music) will bring a blessing from God.

Today, we define worship by the songs we sing or the emotion we feel. Sometimes people say “we need more praise and worship,” meaning, “we want to sing more.” It seems to me, God is saying, “whether or not you *feel like* you have worshipped is irrelevant.” God desires those who respond to His call, listen to His Word, and do what He tells them to do. Worship is an attitude of the heart and should be a part of every element of our worship time. How do I support this assertion? Look at the text! In verse 4 this is what the Lord says. In fact, go back to chapter 1 in Isaiah and you will see this drumbeat begins in the very first of the 66 chapters of Isaiah.

Don't get me wrong, music, creative forms of teaching, and engaging preaching are all important but the only thing that really matter is if our heart has bowed before Him. Are we willing to do what He has told us to do?

Let's move on to verse 5,

⁵ Hear this message from the LORD,
 all you who tremble at his words:
 “Your own people hate you
 and throw you out for being loyal to my name.
 ‘Let the LORD be honored!’ they scoff.
 ‘Be joyful in him!’
 But they will be put to shame.

People struggle some to understand this verse, but it seems clear that when we truly tremble at the Word of God, when we value His teaching above our experience, people (even many believers) will be annoyed. They may even persecute us. They want to be content with a nod to God. And when we dare to seek to honor the Lord some will turn against us and that leads me to the third principle for living.

3. Praise from God is far superior to the praise of men (66:5)

We have to choose: would we rather have the praise of men or the praise of God? It is hard to have both. People will praise us when we make THEM feel good. God will praise us when we bow before Him and submit to the spiritual surgery of the soul carried on by the Holy Spirit.

Think about the pressure on people today to bow to the pressures of the world's value system:

- To succumb to sexual pressure over embracing holiness
- To esteem success over faithfulness (as seen by dwindling church attendance)
- To keep score rather than forgive
- To accumulate riches versus cultivating a generous spirit
- To be a child's friend rather than set necessary parental boundaries
- To be consumers over worshippers
- To choose gossip (and disparaging remarks) over support and encouragement
- To be among the influential rather than associate with the needy and hurting

We all desperately want to fit in. The problem is: if we are seeking the praise of men, we will not be receiving praise from God. The two are at odds with each other. We have said it many times, as believers, it is our job to live our lives for the audience of One!

The next section is the longest in the chapter. Let me read Just verses 6-11

⁶ What is all the commotion in the city?
 What is that terrible noise from the Temple?
 It is the voice of the LORD
 taking vengeance against his enemies.

⁷ "Before the birth pains even begin,
 Jerusalem gives birth to a son.
⁸ Who has ever seen anything as strange as this?
 Who ever heard of such a thing?
 Has a nation ever been born in a single day?
 Has a country ever come forth in a mere moment?
 But by the time Jerusalem's birth pains begin,
 her children will be born.

⁹ Would I ever bring this nation to the point of birth
 and then not deliver it?" asks the LORD.
 "No! I would never keep this nation from being born,"
 says your God.

¹⁰ "Rejoice with Jerusalem!
 Be glad with her, all you who love her
 and all you who mourn for her.

¹¹ Drink deeply of her glory
 even as an infant drinks at its mother's comforting breasts."

Jerusalem was occupied by foreign armies. The Jews were facing the hostility of men. But here God says He is rising to their defense. He will so bless His people that it will be like having your baby without ever going into labor (v.8). Later God says they will be given wealth. Their children will be cared for, and they will flourish. But their flourishing will not be a reward for their good efforts or their political acumen. They will flourish because it is exactly what God promised. And that leads to principle number 4.

4. We should trust God's Promise rather than our Present Circumstances (6-24)

We must not become terrified by the wickedness around us. We must not throw up our hands and conclude all is lost. The present circumstances (good or bad) should not be the source of our peace and our confidence. It should be the Lord's promise we rely on.

We fret over all kinds of things . . . things that the Lord can provide and will provide if we need them. Just as He can cause a baby to be born without any labor pain and He can make a nation out of one man and his family (V. . He can deliver the addict, restore the broken relationship, heal the disease-racked body, provide for the cash-strapped family, bring to faith the prodigal child. Instead of fretting, we should be seeking the Lord and trusting His promise to do above and beyond all we can ask or imagine.

We may think our lives are worthless; that we have nothing to contribute to life anymore, but God has promised that He would work through us. The fact that we don't know how or where He is doing so, should not cause us to be discouraged. His ways, are not our ways.

You may be going through a dry spell and you conclude that God has turned away from you because you feel distant, or things just don't seem to be turning out well. The lesson here is we should trust the promise of God rather than the circumstances that surround us.

And that leads us to the last verses of the chapter verses 22-24

²² "As surely as my new heavens and earth will remain,
so will you always be my people,
with a name that will never disappear,"
says the LORD.

²³ "All humanity will come to worship me
from week to week
and from month to month.

²⁴ And as they go out, they will see
the dead bodies of those who have rebelled against me.
For the worms that devour them will never die,
and the fire that burns them will never go out.
All who pass by
will view them with utter horror."

5. We Must Remember Where We Are Going to Make the Most of where we are

This is a mixed message. We have a glorious promise and a morbid picture of dead bodies. The promise is that God will never cast aside His people. I believe He is originally referring to the believers in Israel, but I think it can also apply to those of us who have been “grafted in,” meaning non-Jews who have turned to Christ as their Lord and Savior.

We have this great picture of Heaven as a time when we are filled with wonder, adoration, and worship of the Lord. This is not about the songs we sing or the pews we sit in, it is about a true attitude that leaves us mesmerized with the Lord.

There are times when I look at Debbie and can't believe I get to be married to her. I am, if you will, in awe of my rich blessing. That is just a hint of what it will be like before the Lord. Can you imagine standing before His presence, knowing you are there solely because of His mercy and grace? We cannot begin to fathom the gratitude, the adoration, and the thrill, of being in the presence of our Lord who gave His life for us. I love the way John Oswalt says it,

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It is indeed a story that ends with, “and they lived happily ever after” or as C.S. Lewis writes, “this life was only the title page of the great story, the one in which every chapter is better than the one before it.”

But before we leave Isaiah, we have to also face the dark reality that parallels these glorious truths. For those who refuse to adopt the humble and repentant attitude and instead determine they will live their way no matter what God says, the story will be very different. There will be regret, weeping, torment, and eternal separation from the Lord. These people will wish they could just be wiped out, but instead, they will get the life they chose: a life devoid of the blessings of God and the richness of a relationship with Him. They will get utter loneliness, they will be fully self-absorbed and will have to live with the reality that they had a choice, and they chose the torment they are now enduring.

The Book of Isaiah is challenging in places, but the message comes through clear: “They who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up with wings like angels, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” May that be our experience until we see Him face to face! (Isaiah 40:31).