

Foundations: The Prophets 1
DO RIGHT
Isaiah 1:1-3, 15-20 AFBC 4/29/18

As we began this year, I promised you that our look at some of the foundational passages of Scripture would increasingly focus on Jesus. So far, that's what we've done.

For the next few Sundays, however, we're going to look at the prophets. In Jesus' day, the Scriptures were often called "the Law and the Prophets."

So far, those foundational Old Testament passages we've considered have all come from the Law—specifically, from the book of Genesis and the Ten Commandments.

Beginning today, we'll spend a few weeks considering the messages of the Prophets, especially the writings of the Prophet Isaiah. We cannot fully understand the life and ministry of Jesus without seeing it in the context of Israel's prophetic tradition.

Jesus was called Prophet and Teacher long before He became known as Savior and Lord. We gain deeper insight into Jesus by listening to the words of the prophets who came before Him—and especially Isaiah who, as it has often been pointed out, comes closer to the Gospels than any of the other Old Testament scriptures.

So with that, I invite you to look with me at Isaiah, chapter 1, verses 1-3 and 16-20:

The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

**² Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth!
For the LORD has spoken:
"I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
³ The ox knows its master,
the donkey its owner's manger,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand."**

....

**16 Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.**

**17 Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.**

Now, the one verse in this passage that we know very well:

**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 as crimson,
they shall be like wool.**

Now, we know that verse. Many of us have memorized it. We've heard sermons and lessons on it—most of them emphasizing our Lord's invitation to come to Him and be forgiven and cleansed.

But I'm not calling this message "Be Forgiven" because to do so would ignore Isaiah's main point. Instead, the title is "Do Right!" This comes closer to Isaiah's emphasis and that of the other prophets; and it's also closer to the message of Jesus.

For Jesus, and for the Old Testament prophets before Him, being forgiven is not the final destination, but only a stop—granted, an important stop—but it's just one stop along the way.

Jesus said, "Come, follow me." Forgiveness simply clears the way for us to be fully committed followers of Christ.

Isaiah spoke to people who were going through the motions of religion—they had services and sacrifices designed to atone for their sin; but there was a problem. Their lives were not being affected. Their beliefs were not showing up in the way they lived.

This problem hasn't gone away—and we need to admit it. Let's be honest about the gaps between what we say we believe and how we choose to live. How we've handled this passage may help us see why we get so confused.

Isn't it interesting how well we know verse 18 of Isaiah 1 ("Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow..."—memorized it in Sunday School and Bible Drill), yet we know so little about the rest of the chapter. Take verse 15 as an example—how many of us could quote this?:

¹⁵ When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood...

We didn't read that verse earlier, but we did read the next verse (v. 16) which says: **¹⁶ wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong,...**

What's does this mean? Well, since I'm the one doing the preaching, I'll tell you what I think it means, beginning with this:

1. To Do Right, Stop Doing Wrong! This seems like a very "ungodly" thing for God to say: "When you pray, I won't be watching, and I won't be listening!"

What's gotten God so out of sorts? He tells us in verse 2. He says His children have rebelled against Him. How many parents have had their hearts broken by rebellious children? So has God!

God explains in verse three: 'Even oxen and donkeys know their masters, yet His people don't seem to know Him. They show up for worship, but you'd never know it from the way they live and how they treat others—especially the poor.

This continues in verse 13: "I cannot bear your evil assemblies;" and in verse 14, "They've become a burden to me." Worship one day and wrongdoing the next doesn't work, God says.

In fact, it wears us out. Living a lie is exhausting. God gets tired of it too—so much so that He finally just stops paying attention! If our faith is not infused with integrity and truth, it drains us. If it's all show and no substance, emotions without actions, we feel empty. Spiritual dishonesty depletes us!

It's tiresome to hide our failures and cover-up our flaws. One dishonesty leads to another, and that's a miserable way to live. We're exhausted by worship, and we grow weary of every aspect of our walk with the Lord.

Being something we're not wears us out—and listen: it has the same effect on God! God warns us that He gets so tired of it that He finally just looks away... and stops listening.

God intends for faith to produce in us a genuine righteousness—a way of living that grows out of a relationship with God that's honest and true. Sure, we'll still DO wrong at times, but we won't BE wrong for long, and we certainly won't STAY wrong.

Scripture tells us that God looks on our hearts. He already knows what's wrong with us! So... how do we stop doing wrong and start doing right? Well, let's consider the next verse:

¹⁷ learn to do right! (*There it is; but what's this about?-- something foundational to the Christian life*) **Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.**

If the last verse was about *What's Wrong*, surely this verse is about *What's Right*. Which leads to this:

2. To Do Right, (you must) Know What Right Is!

What's right, friends, is for our faith to be compassionate—taking up the cause of the helpless. This is what the prophets taught—and so did Jesus. If we're not focused on caring for people—we've missed our calling and failed our Lord.

In 1917, the old Russian Empire was failing apart. The Communist revolution was raging. As riots broke out in the streets, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church were engaged in debate.

With their nation in the throes of revolution, these church leaders were heatedly debating whether the sign of the cross should be made with two fingers or three! Is it any wonder that so many Russians decided the church had become irrelevant?

The church of Jesus Christ must be about making us a more compassionate people. If our leaders seem more interested in perks for the rich than in necessities for the poor, we must speak up—for Christ's sake! Lots of people are hurting and do not have time for "trickle down" economics to work.

Should we be concerned? Hear the word of the Lord: "Seek justice (*not about crime and punishment...*), encourage the

oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” This is the message of God’s prophets—and His Son.

The land we live in is filled with children who are fatherless. It’s an epidemic! In many cases, it’s the fathers’ fault—and they should be held accountable—and mothers, too, of course.

But as people of this Book and followers of Jesus Christ, we must never forget that it’s NOT the children’s fault that they’re fatherless; and it’s still our God-given responsibility to take up their cause! It’s the *right* thing to do—because God says so!

But we struggle with this. Maybe this is why we resonate with this next verse--the one we know so well--even though we usually hear it out of context and unrelated to what God is actually saying! Listen to it again, though, along with the verses that come just before and after it:

**17 Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.**

(Do you hear Jesus welcoming into the Father’s Kingdom those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, the foreigner, the alien?...)

**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 as crimson,
they shall be like wool.**

(But now this...)

**19 If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the best from the land;
20 but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword.”
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.**

Reading this verse in context gives it a whole new meaning—if we have ears to hear. Which brings us to this:

3. To Do Right, Know What's Needed.

It sounds so inviting: the eternal God saying to us, "Come, let's reason this out together." And, friends, this IS God's invitation. The witness of Scripture is that God seeks us out more than we go looking for Him. Luke 19:10 affirms this: "For the Son of Man is come to SEEK and to save that which was lost."

The Lord seeks after us. He invites us to come to Him. But this is not an invitation to a debate. This is a good, loving parent inviting His wayward children to a "meeting of the minds."

God is saying to us, "Listen, it's time to get reasonable about what you're doing. It's time to give some thought to who you are and who I am. Come, let's reason together about this."

And what is it that God wants us to get reasonable about? For one thing: the reality of sin. God insists that we see and understand the stubborn stain that sin leaves on our lives.

"Though your sins are like scarlet,... though they are red as crimson..." God is not saying that this could be the case. He's telling us that this fact affects all of us.

You have a new white shirt or blouse. It would be hard to find a more difficult stain to deal with than what?—a red stain.

Red is tough—whether it's beet red, cranberry red, grape red, red clay red, lipstick red, or blood red—it's the toughest of stains to remove. Likewise, God says the stain of sin on our lives is crimson red—it's a tough stain!

How quickly we put up our defenses when the topic of sin comes up—at least, when we're talking about our sin! We may not be so reluctant to discuss our brother's sin, but God is telling us through Isaiah that we need to come to grips with our own sin.

Get reasonable, God says. You're not responsible for their sin, only yours. So each of us needs to get right by confessing our own sin, asking God to forgive us, allowing Him to make us brand new by His grace and power—so that what matters to God begins to matter to us and, as a result, we start DOING RIGHT!

Hear the Lord speaking to your life this morning, saying, "Come now, my child, and let us reason together." Believe in what I've

done for you, place your faith in the One I sent for you, and your crimson-red sins will be white as snow--like lambs' wool.

God is good, and loving, and gracious. He extends this invitation to us all. But He wants us to know that we have responsibilities in this relationship. The last two verses of our text both begin with the small but powerful word, "if": **19 If you are willing and obedient... 20 but if you resist and rebel....**

God doesn't force us. He'll allow us to continue to live in rebellion against Him—selfishly, apathetically toward the needs of others--but there are consequences if we do. God wants us to know. He makes His intentions clear. "The mouth of the Lord has spoken."

It's disturbing how many people make their way through life without ever giving any thought to their relationship with God. We're here today because we have. We believe this is important, or we wouldn't be here.

Isaiah spoke to people who were much like us—people who would never deny God, but they still needed to "Do Right" in their relationship with Him. This would involve several steps:

- 1) acknowledging what was wrong in their lives (their apathy, insincerity, sin);
- 2) realizing what was right for God's people to do (many things, but the focus here was on a genuine concern for the poor and actions that demonstrate this concern); and
- 3) doing what was needed to get headed back in the right direction (repentance, and Doing Right—confessing our apathy and showing compassion).

So, what is it that we need to do in our relationship with God to say that we're serious about this, that our hearts are in it, that our walk with the Lord is real?

This day, this moment, friends, is always a good time to finally... come clean with God and make a commitment to DO RIGHT--to seek justice, to defend the oppressed, and to take up the cause of those who will have no voice in this world unless... it's ours!

We cannot continue to ignore something that's this foundational to who we are in Christ. Brothers and sisters, let's DO RIGHT!