

“A Primer on Sin”
Isaiah 5
November 18, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

St. Augustine was the great theologian of the ancient church. It is reported that when he was ordained in 391, he wept. He did not weep for joy, but because he knew that he was entering into an undertaking that would be filled with difficulty. While preaching on the anniversary of his ordination he once said, “To preach, to rebuke, to correct, to edify, to care for individual souls is a great burden, great work, great labor. Who would not avoid that labor? But the Gospel frightens me.” One of the advantages of reading something really old is that it is so far removed from your own time and culture that it can provide a more objective perspective on your cultural biases. As I read that phrase from Augustine—“the gospel frightens me”—I was struck by the realization that this is an element largely missing from our current experience of Christianity. People come to church today wanting and expecting to be comforted, uplifted, motivated to do the right thing, and to be told that God loves them just as they are. They don’t come to church wanting to be frightened. But when one who is arguably the greatest theologian God ever gave to the church says that “the gospel frightens me,” we should pay attention. Do you know anything of the fright that can come from the gospel? Should you?

Isaiah 5 is striking in that there is no hope in this passage. The common pattern throughout Isaiah is to have a strong denunciation of sin followed by a promise concerning the grace of God. But no good news or hope appears anywhere in this chapter. It is filled with unrelentingly bad news. Churchgoers of previous generations expected and wanted to hear the bad news of the gospel when they came to church. Their desire to hear this was not due to any sadistic tendencies or guilt-ridden consciences present in their lives. Rather, it was because they understood something we need to understand. Before the gospel can comfort us, it must afflict us. Before we can be calmed by the gospel, we must be frightened by it. Isaiah’s straightforward and clear denunciation of sin in this chapter provides us with the fright of the gospel. I want us to consider four adjectives that describe sin, and that if understood, will prepare us for the comfort of the gospel by first terrifying us.

I. Internal

Isaiah’s song of the vineyard teaches us that sin is something inside us, not something due to our external circumstances. Isaiah invites us to come and listen to his song about his beloved, who turns out to be God. The song speaks of God’s careful and thorough preparations for a cherished grape vine. He takes all the steps of good viticulture in that time and place, with nothing left undone. He

selects a fertile hillside and prepares the soil, which is made difficult by the large number of stones that have to be cleared. There is a parable told in Palestine that says that when God created the world, an angel flew over it carrying a bag of stones under each arm. As he flew over Palestine, one bag broke, which is why half of all the stones in the world are in this region, according to the parable. So for this man to have cleared the hillside of stones would have been arduous labor. The vine he planted was of the highest quality, a **“choice vine”** (v. 2). Next, he took the stones he had cleared from the land and used them to build a watchtower. In this way, the owner could be present, casting a watchful eye over the entire vineyard, so that he could guard it from harmful intruders and encourage its development in all the right ways. He hews out a wine vat, again employing extraordinary labor in the process. This wine vat is the place where the juice collects as the grapes are smashed. It would have been hewn out of a solid rock, again indicating the lengths to which the owner went in working his vineyard.

But the song ends tragically at the end of verse 2. **“He looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.”** It is clear in Isaiah’s brief song that the owner is God and the vineyard Israel. Since it’s easier to see sin in others than in ourselves, Isaiah invites his listeners to make a judgment about the vineyard, not knowing as they do so that they are making a judgment about themselves. He asks them, **“What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?”** The obvious answer is “nothing.” The owner has done all that could be done, but the vineyard has yielded fruit that is no good. The fault is not the owner’s but lies with the vineyard itself.

Isaiah is making a point about sin. Israel’s problem, like ours, is not the presence of undesirable circumstances. Even if all the outward circumstances were perfect, we would go astray, just like Israel did. Our problem is internal, not external. There is a cancer of sin growing inside all of us, and the normal solutions do not work. Let’s consider how we ought to apply this to ourselves. I think the obvious application is not to think that if only our circumstances would change, then we could really follow God and make headway in our spiritual lives. We tell ourselves lies like, “Once I get past this big project at work, then I will work on my spiritual life.” Or, “When I get married, or when I have children, then I will be in a better position to get serious about following God.” In effect, God gives us a blank slate here and says, “You define the perfect circumstances of your life that would lead to spiritual growth. Define your life any way you want: great marriage, plenty of money, an even-keeled and self-disciplined personality.” If such a scenario were to occur, you would be no better off than you are now, and possibly even worse off. Our problem with sin runs deep and so must the solution. But Isaiah is not yet ready to talk to us about a solution. The dark picture of sin must be further filled out first.

II. Substitutionary

Not only is sin internal, it is also substitutionary. What I mean by that is that sinners substitute a variety of things and people for the true God. Much of this can be seen in these six “woes” that Isaiah pronounces upon Judah. A woe is just a curse, and he curses the substitute gods of Judah. First, there is the substitute of acquisitions. **“Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room”** (v. 8). There were quite a few laws in the Old Testament concerning the land. God was the owner of all land, and he leased it out to his people by their families, who were to keep it in the family down through the generations. The permanent transfer of the rights to the land was not permitted in Israel. A family encountering economic hardship could temporarily lease their land to someone else, but they were not allowed to sell it forever. Those Isaiah condemns here have found some way around that law, creating vast estates for themselves and pushing out all others from the land. The substitution of acquisitions for the true God should sound familiar to us. Instead of accumulating land today, most people accumulate that which is far more temporary than land: clothing, electronics, cars and a variety of toys that amuse for just a few moments before the owner tires of them and moves on to the next thing. God brings judgment by making these houses desolate and the land stingy. Ten acres of vineyard yields only one bath of wine, a pitifully small amount that was but a small fraction of what should have been produced. When acquiring stuff becomes god-like, creation itself rebels and withholds the fertility God designed it for. When, on the other hand, the true God is served in generosity toward others, there is a supernatural abundance that God promises.

A second substitution for God is in seeking refuge outside of the true God. Isaiah’s listeners sought it in alcohol, rising **“early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them!”** (v. 11). They woke up early in the morning and began planning their drinking for the day. It began early and continued late into the night. God’s word says that any escaping we need to do, we are to do it to him. He is our refuge and our fortress, to whom we are to flee in time of need. How many psalms speak of God in this way? **“I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress”** (59:16). To flee elsewhere, seeking escape in things like alcohol or work or shopping or being popular and well-liked is to make a deadly substitution, trading the true God for a shell of a god.

Third, there is a substitution in what a person finds heroic and beautiful. **“Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink”** (v. 22). God has put us together in such a way that we simply must find something admirable and heroic. When God is no longer viewed as beautiful and heroic, the human heart substitutes false heroes. Who does your heart admire as heroic? Who would you long to spend a day with? If it is merely the rich, the beautiful or the accomplished, then your heart is making a substitution. Only as we find God truly heroic, so that our hearts deeply admire him, will we be delivered from these false heroes.

III. Addictive

Though the modern language of addiction was not available to Isaiah, note the way his description of sin indicates addictive elements. Verse 18 is particularly striking in this regard. **“Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with cart ropes.”** Commentator Alec Motyer says it well when he summarizes this verse as follows. “Isaiah pictures people harnessed to sin, like animals harnessed to carts. Thus they are the voluntary practitioners of a sinful lifestyle but, as such, they are living an animal existence beneath their true dignity as humans and, as victims of sin’s deceit; they are involved in an increasing bondage as the movement from *cords* to *ropes* indicates” (p. 65).

There are three elements of sin described here that are very much like addiction. First, there is bondage. Those guilty of sin are said to be drawing carts, being tied to them. There is an element of bondage in all sin. What you give yourself to and seek refuge in, you will develop such an attachment to that soon you must have it. So the alcoholic must have his escape into the buzz given by alcohol. It becomes an old friend without which he doesn’t think he can live. The drug addict, the workaholic, the one addicted to pornography becomes attached to his sin so that he can’t manage to break loose. He tries to manage his addiction, telling himself that this will be the last time he engages in such behavior. But the bondage is too deep to be managed so easily. Promising yourself that you will do better next time will never deliver a person from a sinful addiction. One of the reasons is that at the core of addiction is falsehood, an unwillingness to be honest with yourself. Did you notice that the cart is drawn with **“cords of falsehood”**? This makes the bondage even greater, because the dishonesty can be so complete that the one in bondage to sin is unaware of it.

A second element of addiction that is true of our sin is that it tends to escalate. Did you notice the escalation in verse 18, where it begins with cords and then escalates to the greater *ropes*? Sin is like a blackmailer coming to you with his demands. But when the demand is satisfied, what does the blackmailer do? He increases the demand. In the same way, sin makes escalating demands upon us. The little sin that brought pleasure initially doesn’t seem to be enough anymore. We want more and more. This, to me, is one of the most frightening things about sin. We cannot stand still in our fight with sin. All the time, we are either slipping further into sin or we are overcoming it. If you are not right now growing as a Christian in your love for God and your trust in him, sin is tightening its grip upon your soul.

A third way that sin is addictive is that it dehumanizes. The metaphor of verse 18 likens us to animals. Sin removes human dignity and unleashes our bad side. If left unchecked, sin makes monsters of us all, bringing us to such a low place that years before we would never have believed possible. Richard Mouw says that there comes a point in the life of every alcoholic in which he sings his own version

of Martin Luther's hymn: "Let goods and kindred go; this mortal life also; I'm going to get loaded."

IV. Catastrophic

Isaiah's clear message is that sin leads to catastrophic judgment. In the case of Judah, he announces that the nation will be carried off into exile by a nation summoned by God. God merely gestures with a whistle (v. 26), and the strongest army of the earth comes to do his bidding. God is able to use even his enemies to accomplish his will. In this judgment, we see something that consistently characterizes the judgment of God. God judges sinners by doing to them what they would do to others. So God judges the ones who had been guilty of landgrabbing, adding field to field and house to house (v. 8), contrary to God's law, by arranging for the grabbing of their land by another nation. It is the golden rule with teeth. The golden rule says that we are to do unto others as we would have them do to us. The rule of God's judgment says that he will actually have done to us what we do to others.

CONCLUSION:

Though Isaiah leaves us in this chapter with not one word of grace and hope, the overall context of the book, and especially of the Bible itself, doesn't leave us there. It is true that we need to be frightened by the gospel before we can be calmed by it, but it is also true that we must be calmed by it. Let me take us back to the opening verses of the chapter to do that. After God planted his vineyard and did everything possible for it to produce good fruit, and it produced only bad fruit, he asks a question. **"What more was there to do for my vineyard?"** (v. 4). 750 years later, Jesus will give an answer to that question. In John 15, he says that he is the true vine and that all who attach themselves to him will bear much good fruit. God replaced the vine with the perfect man, the God-man Jesus. And now we are to find in Jesus the perfect hero. He is the one who makes it possible for us to produce good fruit and avoid the judgment Isaiah speaks of. All we must do is attach ourselves to him in faith. Give yourself to the one who alone is truly heroic, Jesus the true vine. You have to give yourself to something. Those who don't give themselves to Jesus always give themselves to sin, which brings destruction.

As Augustine was dying, in the year 430, he had the penitential psalms of David written out and fixed to the wall of his bedroom, where he could read them repeatedly so that he could confess his sins and praise God for His mercy to him in the words of the Psalms. Down to his dying days, this man who taught the church of his day more about the grace of God than anyone else, knew that the gospel must frighten us in order to calm us. May you be comforted by this gospel!