



Sermon Transcript September 23, 2018

Hospitable God, Hospitable People Contrite and Humble Isaiah 56:9-57:21

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 23, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Isaiah 56:9-57:21

56:9 All you beasts of the field, come to devour— all you beasts in the forest. ¹⁰ His watchmen are blind; they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs; they cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. ¹¹ The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. But they are shepherds who have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all. ¹² “Come,” they say, “let me get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow will be like this day, great beyond measure.” **57:1** The righteous man perishes, and no one lays it to heart; devout men are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous man is taken away from calamity; ² he enters into peace; they rest in their beds who walk in their uprightness.

³ But you, draw near, sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and the loose woman. ⁴ Whom are you mocking? Against whom do you open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue? Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit, ⁵ you who burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree, who slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks? ⁶ Among the smooth stones of the valley is your portion; they, they, are your lot; to them you have poured out a drink offering, you have brought a grain offering. Shall I relent for these things? ⁷ On a high and lofty mountain you have set your bed, and there you went up to offer sacrifice. ⁸ Behind the door and the doorpost you have set up your memorial; for, deserting me, you have uncovered your bed, you have gone up to it, you have made it wide; and you have made a covenant for yourself with them, you have loved their bed, you have looked on nakedness. ⁹ You journeyed to the king with oil and multiplied your perfumes; you sent your envoys far off, and sent down even to Sheol. ¹⁰ You were wearied with the length of your way, but you did not say, “It is hopeless”; you found new life for your strength, and so you were not faint. ¹¹ Whom did you dread and fear, so that you lied, and did not remember me, did not lay it to heart? Have I not held my peace, even for a long time, and you do not fear me? ¹² I will declare your righteousness and your deeds, but they will not profit you. ¹³ When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you! The wind will carry them all off, a breath will take them away. But he who takes refuge in me shall possess the land and shall inherit my holy mountain.

¹⁴ And it shall be said, “Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way.” ¹⁵ For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who

is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite. ¹⁶ For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before me, and the breath of life that I made. ¹⁷ Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart. ¹⁸ I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, ¹⁹ creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,” says the Lord, “and I will heal him. ²⁰ But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. ²¹ There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

Introduction

As we walk through the third section of the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 56-66, I want to make sure we keep the big picture of Isaiah in front of us. By keeping the big picture of the book of Isaiah in front of us, it helps us understand the particular passage we are looking on a given Sunday morning. After all, Isaiah is a big book—66 chapters—and it would be easy to “lose sight of the forest for the trees.”

John Oswalt suggests that the theme of Isaiah is “servanthood.” More specifically, he says that as the servant of God, Israel was the means by which God would reach the nations.¹ As early as Isaiah 2, we see a day coming when the nations are streaming to Jerusalem to learn how to live according to the way of God. It says in Isaiah 2:3, “*and many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.’*” Of course, this role for Israel in being God’s light to the nations doesn’t catch us by total surprise. All the way back in Genesis 12:3, when God chose Abraham and told him that many descendants would come from him, God also said that through his descendants, “*all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*”

But here is the problem that emerges at the beginning of Isaiah. How can “this Israel be that Israel” who brings the nations to God, when they themselves are far from God? How can they be God’s servant, when they themselves are not serving God? We heard Isaiah’s confession last week, “*I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.*”

We discover in the second part of the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 40-55, that the means by which Israel will be the servant of God to the nations is through “the Servant.” In this second portion of Isaiah, there are four “servant songs” that tell us about this coming

Servant of God. In Isaiah 52-53 we discover that this Servant is the “suffering servant” who will atone for the sins of the people. But it is in Isaiah 49 we learn that through this coming Servant, God will keep his promise to reach the nations with his grace. In Isaiah 49:6 he says, *“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”* And so it is through Jesus that God keeps the promise he made to Abraham to bless the nations and to form a people who live according to the ways of God.

Some have suggested that Isaiah could have ended with Isaiah 55. It would have been a great way to end the book. It ends with an invitation to come and receive the grace and the forgiveness of sin that is found in “the Servant” who is Jesus. The past two weeks we read the invitation of Isaiah 55 to buy without money the food and the drink that God freely gives to us. But the book of Isaiah does not end with the message that you are saved by grace. Rather, the third section of Isaiah, Isaiah 56-66, tells us why God sends “the Servant” to atone for the sin of his people. It is so that we can be God’s servants to proclaim to the world God’s grace.

As we began our journey in Isaiah 56-66 last week, we heard the wonderful news that indeed God’s grace was spreading to the world. We saw that both the foreigner and the eunuch—the outcast—were receiving the invitation of God’s grace and they were becoming part of the covenant people of God. In other words, the vision of Isaiah 2, where the nations are streaming to Jerusalem, is already being fulfilled as the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ spreads to the nations.

As we walk through Isaiah 56-66, we are learning what it looks like to be God’s servant in this world. Like Isaiah said in Isaiah 6, we are saying through Isaiah 56-66, *“Here am I! Send me.”* By saying *“Here am I! Send me”* we are not talking about packing up our bags and going to some far distant country. Rather, we are talking about walking out of our door and going next door—across the street—to our neighborhood. Rosaria Butterfield puts it this way, “I know I can’t save anyone. Jesus alone saves, and all I do is show up.” And then she says, “Show up we must.”² Why? Because we are servants of God sent into this world to proclaim the love and grace of Jesus.

As we seek to “show up” as God’s servants in this world, Isaiah issues us a warning in our passage this morning. The light of Jesus that is to shine through us has a dimmer switch. That dimmer switch that darkens the light of Jesus through us is our sin. If we want to be the light of Jesus in this world, his servants, we must be humble and contrite.

Our Sin: Dimming the Light

Using Israel as our frame of reference, Isaiah is recounting for us what it was about Israel that kept them from being God's servant in this world. What kept them from shining the light of God's grace to the nations around them? In very simple terms, it was the pervasive nature of their sin that dimmed their light. Isaiah basically says two things about the sin of Israel. First of all, the sinful condition of Israel was prevalent among their leaders. And secondly, at the root of their sin was idolatry. It was the breaking of the first commandment, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*"

Before we are quick to cast a stone at Israel, we must see that Isaiah is really describing for us the human condition. I like what John Oswalt concludes about this passage. He says that this passage reveals to us the nature of human character. He said, "This condition of sin is deeply, deeply ingrained in us humans."³ Sin is ingrained in the heart of a person in power and in the heart of the populace. Really what this is getting at is the inability of Israel on their own to be that light that God has called them to be because they are a sinful people. This sinful condition marks every corner of culture.

Sinful Leaders: Isaiah begins by addressing the leaders of Israel. He basically says that the leaders of Israel are abusing their power and they are not looking out for the people they are supposed to serve. This is an indictment against their spiritual leaders as well as their political leaders. In other words, this passage sounds like the daily conversation we hear on our cable news programs. When we watch our cable news programs, it seems like our political leaders are more motivated by gaining power for their party than they are in working together for the needs of the people they serve. At the same time, it seems like the church has a hard time speaking into the moral vacuum of our culture when on a regular basis it is reported that the same sins that plague our political leaders are also prevalent among our church leaders. The #MeToo Movement has touched every sector of leadership in our culture, including the church. The title page of a recent Christian publication *World Magazine* had the title *We Too*.⁴ In light of what has come out in the Catholic Church recently this magazine was filled with one painful story after another of how it is also in our evangelical churches. This sinful human condition remains prevalent in our world and my main concern this morning is how the issue of our sinful condition makes its mark on the leadership of the church and consequently impacts our ability as the church to be the servant that God has called us to be.

In Isaiah 56:9-12, Isaiah uses two words that describe spiritual leadership. A spiritual leader is to be a *watchman* and a *shepherd*. A *watchman* warns of danger that comes

from the outside. But the spiritual leaders of Israel are called “*blind watchmen*” and they are compared to watch dogs that don’t bark. What good is that? In fact, they are likened to dogs that just sleep all day. The word for sleep could be translated as “dreaming” and one commentator described the spiritual leaders of Israel this way, “Instead of staying alert watching for the approach of the enemy, the dogs are fast asleep, their legs twitching in dreams, only waking up long enough to yawn and change positions.”⁵ Consequently, they don’t *shepherd* the people and they use their positions to profit themselves. It says in verse 12, “*Come,*” *they say, “let me get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow will be like this day, great beyond measure.”*

The principle is a simple principle we see at play over and over again in the Old Testament. As the leader goes, so goes the people. It was a principle that was true in the time of Jesus as well. His battle was often not with the people, but with the spiritual leaders. But it was the influence of the spiritual leaders that caused the people to cry, “*crucify him!*” And so Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day that they make those who follow them “*twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.*” That is a sobering statement. It was the sinful condition of the spiritual leaders that kept Israel from being the servant in the world that God called them to be.

This is why God calls the elders of the church to be “watchmen” - to watch their life and their doctrine closely. Elders in the church are to keep watch over their lives and to set an example “*in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.*” They are also to keep watch over the ministry of the Word of God—the public reading and preaching of God’s Word. It is interesting to note that three times in our passage the blind watchmen of Israel are accused of having a lack of knowledge. It says that they were *without knowledge . . . they never have enough* (literally, do not know what satisfies) and *they do not understand*. The ministry of the Word is critical to being a spiritual watchman. And so Paul says to the leaders of the church in 1 Timothy 4:16, “*Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.*” In other words, good spiritual leadership in the church is essential for the church to be God’s servant in this world. But the problem with Israel was that their shepherds “*have all turned their own way, each to his own gain, one and all.*” So they failed to be the light God called them to be to the nations.

Idolatry: The scene shifts in our passage from the sin that plagues the leaders to the idolatry that plagues the people. Isaiah starts off in Isaiah 57:3, “*But you, draw near, sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and the loose woman. Whom are you mocking? Against whom do you open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue? Are you not*

children of transgression, the offspring of deceit.” Then he concludes this thought in verse 13, *“When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you! The wind will carry them all off, a breath will take them away.”* He likens their idolatry to spiritual adultery and he warns them that in the end it will not deliver them. Of course, their idolatry prevents them from being the servant that God has called them to be.

When we think of idolatry in the Old Testament, we think of statutes and idols. But I am inclined to think that Isaiah is using idols as a figure of speech to describe that nature of Israel’s heart. Next week we will be in Isaiah 58 and we will observe that the people of Israel were very religious in observing their religion. They religiously observed the Sabbath and they fasted regularly. And so I don’t think they are literally worshiping fertility gods here nor are they literally offering their children as sacrifices to the gods. Instead, Isaiah is pointing out what John Calvin has acknowledged as well, “our hearts are idol factories.” Actually what stands in opposition to worshiping God is our own pride and our own lust for other things besides God.

Lets be honest, we regularly bow down to the idols of money and possessions and pleasure. Paul says it this way in Colossians 3:5, *“Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”* That kind of sounds like the language of our passage this morning. In Isaiah 57:4-5 he says of the people of Israel, *“Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit, you who burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree, who slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks?”* I noticed in our prayer gathering this past Monday, when we moved to a time of confession, it didn’t take us long to start identifying the idols that readily keep us from the love of God.

There is a podcast I like to listen to called “This Cultural Moment.” It is hosted by a pastor from Portland, Oregon and a pastor from Australia. They are talking about this post-Christian secular moment we currently find in the West. For many in the church it is a fearful time. Some even find themselves chewing on their fingernails, wondering if the church will survive in the West. In a recent episode, there was an interesting observation made by the two hosts. The cracks are beginning to show in all the institutions we look to and trust. We see it in politics. We see it in the entertainment industry. We see it in the economic sector. And it is kind of what Isaiah is getting at in Isaiah 57:13. It is God’s judgment. *“When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you! The wind will carry them all off, a breath will take them away.”* As they were talking about this, the pastor from Australia said it is Christ’s judgment coming against the powers. The pastor from Portland interrupted and said, “even in the church.” The

pastor from Australia went on to say, “Even in the church, we are seeing elements of the church which has held onto earthly power versus the way of Jesus falling over, so that the judgment of Jesus that comes against anything that is not of him we are seeing in our time.” While he acknowledges there are elements of this that seem fearful, it is also the way that God gets ready to do something new. He said that in Australia the Aboriginals would burn off parts of the bush in a controlled burning so that new growth would come up.”⁶ That is what God is doing today.

So the world is asking the people of God, “why should we accept your God?” You are no different than us. You lie like us. You are arrogant like us. You are self-centered like us. You are self-pleasing like us. How are you any different than us? Do you see, how our idolatry diminishes our ability to be light in this world? Left to ourselves, we are all plagued with this human condition called sin. How can we be that light to the world that God has called us to be? How can we possibly be the servants God has called us to be in this world when we are all plagued with this deeply ingrained human condition called sin? God help us!

God’s Comfort: Shining the Light

What we can’t do, God is able to do in us. The rest of this passage is filled with incredible hope for the church as we seek to be God’s servant in this world. God has not left us to ourselves as we seek to be his servants in this world. In fact, the resolve of God to do for us what we can’t do for ourselves is seen in the words of God, “*I will . . .*” Look what God says in verse 18, “*I will heal him; will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,*” says the Lord, “*and I will heal him.*”

So what does God do for us so that we can be his servants in this world and let his light shine through us? God first of all makes a way for us to come to him. He establishes for us a clear path to come to him. He says in verse 14, “*And it shall be said, ‘Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people’s way.’*” That sounds similar to what we read in Isaiah 40 as Isaiah begins to introduce us to the coming Servant. Here he says, “*A voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.*” Of course, Matthew uses this verse to explain the ministry of John the Baptist who comes announcing the coming of Jesus and the kingdom of God to earth. The reason there is a way wide open to God is because of the work of the Servant, Jesus.

So what do we need to do to clear the way? How do we remove any obstruction that exists between us and God? In verse 15 he says, “*For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”*” That is a wonderful and encouraging verse. The God who dwells on high because he is the eternal God, also dwells with *the contrite* who humble themselves in repentance.

The Hebrew word for *contrite* literally means “crushed.” Literally it can be used to refer to something that is crushed into powder. It is interesting to note that this is the same word used in Isaiah 53:5 where it says of the Servant—Jesus—that “*he was crushed for our iniquities.*” Oswalt says, “Because the servant has been crushed, God can sit in the dust with those who have been crushed.”⁷ So the call for us is to be humble and contrite. This is the posture that creates a smooth road to God.

I think it is important to remember where we are in Isaiah. We are in the third part of Isaiah where we are learning what it looks like to be God’s servant in this world. So this is not just dealing with the kind of repentance that is needed to be saved. That is what Isaiah 55 was about. But the way we are saved is also the way we shine the light of Jesus to this broken world. We maintain a humble and contrite spirit before God and this is what revives us and empowers us to be God’s servants in this world.

This is so critical to shining the light of God’s love to our neighbors. Butterfield calls it becoming “a contagion of grace.”⁸ She makes the case that hospitality is a critical piece to being God’s servants in this secular culture in the West because the world mistrusts the church. We have already acknowledged some of the reasons why there is a high distrust of the church. We may chafe under the accusation that the church can be hypocritical—saying one thing and doing another. But it is what the world tends to see. So how do we combat this image? It is through relationship forged in hospitality.

There is a lot that you can say can be gained through this hospitality. But I am intrigued by two things that Butterfield highlights in her book. First of all, she says that when we open our homes and lives to others, they get to hear us pray. That may seem like a small thing to you, but I would suggest it is big. Because when we pray in front of our guests we demonstrate that we can talk to God because we know we are good with God because of what Jesus has done for us and that this high and holy God is concerned for our daily needs. We mentioned last week the scary proposition of living life without God. Through hospitality, we get to demonstrate the wonder of living in relationship with

God. I would suggest to you that there is something powerful about this.

The second thing that hospitality brings is that our unsaved friends get to watch us struggle with our own sins and our sinful nature. I think we sometimes portray a “holier than thou” picture of Christianity, and that is not an accurate picture. In verses 16-17, Isaiah says of God, *“For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before me, and the breath of life that I made. Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart.”* If God didn’t relent of his anger, who here could stand before God? Instead we see that it is the mercy of God that brings us peace. He says in verses 18-19, *“I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,” says the Lord, “and I will heal him.”* Susan Hunt says it this way, “When God’s grace changes our status from rebel to redeemed, we are empowered by his Spirit to obey him.”⁹

Conclusion

I want to conclude by making this observation. Early in Isaiah we hear Isaiah confess that he *“dwells in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”* That is the human condition that marks all of us. Our passage ends by telling us the change that Jesus brings to the life that “mourns” over their sin and turns in faith to Jesus. In verse 19 he describes this change as *“creating the fruit of the lips.”* The fruit of our lips speaks *“Peace, peace to the far and to the near.”* We move from “unclean lips” to lips that proclaim “peace.” Words from peace can only come from a heart that remains humble and contrite before God. Stay on your knees. Spend time confessing your sin. Know that your status before God is based only on the merits of Jesus. Be an instrument of God’s peace as you seek to live as God’s servant in this world.

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- ¹John Oswalt “Isaiah Bible Study: Isaiah 56-57” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6ZwbgLtx58&t=191s> This video gives a brief and helpful overview of Isaiah
- ²Rosaria Butterfield *The Gospel Comes with A House Key* ((Wheaton: Crossway, 2018) Kindle Reader, Location 285
- ³John Oswalt “Isaiah Bible Study: Isaiah 57, 65” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3udaGvs9wA>
- ⁴Marvin Olasky, Sophia Lee and Emily Belz “Crouching At Every Door” *World Magazine* September 15, 2018, 32-41
- ⁵Cheyne quoted in John Oswat, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 468
- ⁶John Mark Comer and Mark Sayers “This Cultural Moment” Season 2, Episode 3, June 12, 2018, <https://thisculturalmoment.podbean.com/e/case-study-part-one-pete-hughes-of-kxc-in-london/>
- ⁷Oswalt, 487
- ⁸Butterfield, Kindle Reader Location 361-414
- ⁹Susan Hunt *Women’s Devotional Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014) “From Empty to Full” 1269

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What words would you use to describe the neighborhood where you live? How do the neighbors interact with each other?
2. Are you currently encouraged or discouraged? Why? How would you like others to pray for you?
3. What did you take from the sermon on Sunday?

Diving Into The Word

4. It was noted on Sunday that “servanthood” is the theme of Isaiah. What do you think it looks like to serve God? What do you learn about being a servant from Philippians 2:5-8?
5. Read Isaiah 56:9-57:2: What do you discover about Israel’s leaders in this passage? Why do you think good spiritual leadership is so important to the work of the church? See 1 Timothy 4:12-16.
6. Read Isaiah 57:14-15: With whom does God dwell? What do you think it looks like to be “contrite” and “lowly”? How does this impact how you view people in your neighborhood?
7. Read Isaiah 57:16-19: What do you learn about the grace of God from this passage? How does God’s grace empower you to be an agent of God’s peace in the world?

Taking It Home

8. What would you like your neighbors to see about your faith?
9. Share one way you can take the posture of a servant towards your neighbors this week.