

## Infinitely Compassionate

The main text today is Isaiah 55:6-9...

- While you are turning there, I want to reference a passage in Psalms. Psalm 50 was written by a fellow named Asaph who was a worship leader and prophet in King David's court.
- In Psalm 50, Asaph is a mouthpiece for God. God is noting major differences between Himself, the people of Israel, and evildoers who do not honor Him or His ways. When speaking against the wicked, God calls out their sins – they hate instruction, they slander others...even those of their own family, they approve of thievery and adultery, and they speak in deceitful and cruel ways.
- Then God says this: "These things you have done, and I kept silent. **You thought I was altogether like you...**" (*Isaiah 50:21a, NKJV*) Your version might say "You thought I was just like you."
- It's true that we humans, in our most base and natural state, have little fear of God. When we are not denying His existence, we are acting as if He is just like us. We bring Him down to our level, pretending that our reasoning matches His.
- Even worse, in our unredeemed state, we frequently criticize God's ways and His providence. We sit in judgment of God.
- It's not abnormal to hear those who have rejected God say things like "I could never worship a God like the one in the Bible."
- Others may not be so overtly critical of the Almighty but, instead, think of Him as just a big, generous, cheerful overseer whose main purpose is to meet all our needs. His role is to glorify US instead of the other way around.
- For those of us who have been redeemed by a most gracious God, we know He is definitely NOT altogether like us. Our God, as was perfectly imaged by Christ Jesus, is "**full of grace and truth.**" (*John 1:14*)
- I'll state a general principle here, and it's one of the main ideas I want to impress upon us today. It's this: There is an infinite separation between us and God. Even though he created us in his image, He remains the Creator, and we are the created.
- The more we grow in grace - the more we allow God to sanctify us - the more we realize how unlike God we truly are. The more closely we walk with Him, the more base and imperfect we see ourselves when compared to our glorious and infinitely holy Creator.
- I read a short article the other day by the singer/songwriter/worship leader Matt Redman titled "The Otherness of God." I thought it was profound. Here are a few potent comments from his essay:

"For worship to be worship, it must contain something of the otherness of God....Otherness gives us a sense that God is so pure, matchless and unique that no one else and nothing else even comes close. He is altogether glorious—unequaled in splendor and unrivalled in power. He is beyond the grasp of human reason—far above the reach of even the loftiest scientific mind. He is inexhaustible, immeasurable and unfathomable—eternal, immortal and invisible...Many music critics note that the skill of songwriter Bruce Springsteen lies in his ability to take the everyday, the ordinary, and make it sound extraordinary. Sometimes in the Church we find ourselves doing the total opposite—we take the extraordinary revelation of God and somehow manage to make Him sound completely ordinary! We fail to communicate the sense of God's otherness."

- I almost titled this message "The Otherness of God." But that term takes a bit of explanation.
- Let's look at Isaiah 55, starting in verse 6, to see what God says, through the prophet Isaiah, about His otherness, the differences between Him and us.
- By the way, Isaiah's calling card, his unique credentials that gave him the right to speak for the Almighty, was the fact that he had been transported, by way of a supernatural vision, to the very throne room of God. While there, he was commissioned to speak on God's behalf to the wayward people of Judah.
- Isaiah's first response to what he saw were these words, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!" Isaiah was a firsthand witness to the otherness of God, and it was his undoing.
- Ok, listen to what he says in this passage from Chapter 55:

***<sup>6</sup> Seek the Lord while He may be found,  
Call upon Him while He is near.***

***<sup>7</sup> Let the wicked forsake his way,  
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
Let him return to the Lord,  
That he may have compassion on him;  
And to our God,  
For He will abundantly pardon.***

***<sup>8</sup> "For My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord.***

***<sup>9</sup> "For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are My ways higher than your ways,  
And My thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:6-9, ESV)***

- Notice the parallelism, which is a poetic device used frequently by the Hebrew prophets. Truths are repeated, but restated with different words, for emphasis. It's like the prophet poet is saying "Do this, and I'll say it again, do it!" And "God is like this, and I really mean it!" (look again at the parallelism in each of the verses above)
- Those last 2 verses, verses 8 and 9, are among the most frequently quoted verses from the Old Testament. And rightly so.
- His ways and thoughts are, indeed, not anything like ours. They are infinitely different. The Puritan preachers used to say that we are like worms before Him. The thoughts of our hearts, if exposed, would condemn us dozens if not hundreds of times every day. Lord have mercy on us!
- But the truth expressed in these verses isn't all negative. I'll admit, you may feel somewhat beat up by what I've shared so far. I understand. It's hard to talk about God's holiness without also highlighting our unholiness. But there's a lot of good news here!
- Isaiah is issuing a call to anyone who would listen, an invitation to seek God, to call upon Him while the time is ripe. What makes the time ripe? – God's nearness.
- Make no mistake. One of God's attributes is omnipresence – He is everywhere, He fills everything at all times. There is never a time when, technically, God isn't near. If we don't sense God's nearness, it's not because He has left the building.

- Another attribute of God is His omniscience...He knows everything. This is why, in verse 7, the call is made for the unrighteous man to forsake his wicked thoughts. God knows our ways and our thoughts, and many of them are not like God's.
  - The prophet is making an appeal to anyone whose heart was in a place to recognize God's nearness to forsake their wicked ways and thoughts and return to the Lord who is always near, infinitely compassionate, and always ready to abundantly pardon. That's good news!
  - By contrast, how ready are we to abundantly pardon those who may have transgressed against us or who have not attained our sometimes arbitrary standards of righteousness?
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- A few weeks ago, on a Sunday afternoon, we were home and we heard a lot of sirens. Soon after, we heard a helicopter that was evidently dispatched to the scene of whatever crisis was occurring. Donna, using some apps on her phone, discovered that a pontoon boat out on the lake had flipped and was upside-down in the water near Alexander's Landing.
  - A bit later that afternoon, on the Buckeye Lake Boaters and Friends Facebook group, someone posted photos of the boat. As is typical in this group, many people were making comments. We learned that all the family members on the boat were safe and uninjured, which was a relief.
  - Immediately after that, folks were making comments about their suspicions regarding what might have happened. Things like "The driver was obviously drunk," or "Novices should not be allowed on Buckeye Lake," or "Another crazy boater gets what is coming to him." It was relentless with a lot of "piling on." Definitely, little compassion was being expressed.
  - Later that evening, the wife of the driver and the mother of the children on the boat posted in the Facebook group what had happened. She noted, first of all, that her husband was a very experienced boater, that he had not been drinking, and that this was, indeed, a very freak accident.
  - They were pulling an inflated couch-like tube, and their three children were riding on the tube. The lake was very choppy due to some stiff wind and a lot of boating traffic. They hit a big wave and it flipped the tube over in the water, tossing the kids into the lake. The wife, who was the observer, told her husband and he immediately slowed down and turned to go back and get their children.
  - Just as he turned, another large wave hit the pontoon boat broadside. Before anyone could take corrective action, the boat went up on one pontoon and then turned upside down.
  - She explained what caused the accident. Apparently, a few seconds earlier when the tube flipped, the nose of the tube submerged in the water and the entire tube was pulled under, making it like a huge anchor. That was the exact moment the dad started to turn the boat and the wave hit it from the side. It was a "perfect storm" of compounding circumstances.
  - In her Facebook comment, the mother publicly thanked the kind folks in another boat who saw it happen and who came to rescue the entire family.
  - She didn't lash out at those who were making negative comments. Instead, she noted it was a humbling and painful experience, then she made suggestions about what others could do to make sure it didn't happen to them.
  - My heart went out to her. And I was grieved and a bit angry that the first response, by many people in difficult situations like this, is to gloat or to make fun or to point fingers.
  - Where is the compassion? Why are so many of our human counterparts so quick to judge and to almost revel in the pain of others?

- As I reflected on this situation, my conscience kicked in. I realized that I am really no better. If my thoughts were put on a big screen as I have navigated through life and engaged with my human counterparts, the world would see that my thoughts and my ways are also significantly less than perfect. Any secret judgment I might render could be turned back on me...and I could only reply "Guilty" if I were put on the stand as a defendant.
- I rarely post in this Facebook group. But, this time, I wanted to be among one of the first to thank the brave woman and to commend her on her selflessness. She risked a lot of embarrassment in order to make the recounting of their experience one that might benefit those who would read and pay attention.
- Contrast all of this with what God says about Himself. And it's the other main idea I'd like to impress on us today. The first was that He is altogether NOT like us. **The other main idea is that He is compassionate. He abundantly pardons. As far as the heavens are higher than the earth, so different are our thoughts and ways than His. And yet He has infinite compassion toward us.**
- Unlike us, He would never vindictively and smugly smear someone else. While Christ walked the earth, He confronted people, especially the hypocritical Pharisees. But every word that came from His mouth was absolutely true. He never bore false witness. He never got some sort of secret, juicy delight while embarrassing those who were opposed to Him. He was full of grace and truth. Christ's demands of them were "altogether righteous." (Psalm 19:9b)
- So, yes, there is that difference between sinful humanity and a most holy God.
- But, perhaps, God's primary purpose in these verses in Isaiah is to focus our attention more on the positive aspects of His compassion and not the negative comparison between His holiness and our "worminess."
- Because we were made in the image of God, we humans are capable of showing much compassion. We visit our sick friends in the hospital. We send cards. We prepare meals. We come to the aid of those in need. We donate to causes that help others less fortunate than ourselves.
- But the greatest human compassion pales in the light of God's mercy. Mother Teresa's lifelong, selfless compassion was and is infinitely less than the Lord's. "As far as the heavens are higher than the earth" less. And this comparison is not to take away anything from the charity work Mother Teresa demonstrated in her life.
- Are we even capable of comprehending how merciful, how compassionate, the Lord is toward our weaknesses, our struggles, our shortcomings, and even our sinful nature? We capture a glimpse of it when we read about how our Lord Jesus walked through His life. Some lines from a song I learned over 50 years ago put it as succinctly as anything:
 

"He healed the broken hearted; He set the captives free.  
He made the lame to walk again, and He caused the blind to see.  
He's able, He's able, I know He's able.  
I know my Lord is able to carry me through."
- Can we short circuit God's compassion? Certainly God can overcome any resistance on our part, but He does place a fearful amount of onus, or responsibility, on us.

- As we review verses 6 and 7 from the passage in Isaiah, our part is to return to Him, to seek Him, and to call upon Him. We are to forsake our wicked ways and our unrighteous thoughts.
- His compassion and His willingness to abundantly pardon is fearfully contingent on us humbling ourselves before this glorious otherness, before the God who is altogether not like us.
- John Calvin, in his commentary on these verses from Isaiah said, “God is infinitely compassionate and infinitely ready to forgive, so that it ought to be ascribed exclusively to our unbelief, if we do not obtain pardon from Him.”
- C.S. Lewis, in his excellent essay titled *“The Weight of Glory”* made this insightful and chilling observation:

“St. Paul promises to those who love God not, as we should expect, that they will know Him, but that they will be known by Him (1 Corinthians 8:3). It is a strange promise. Does not God know all things at all times? But it is dreadfully re-echoed in another passage of the New Testament. There we are warned that it may happen to any one of us to appear at last before the face of God and hear only the appalling words, “I never knew you. Depart from me.” In some sense, as dark to the intellect as it is unendurable to the feelings, we can be both banished from the presence of Him who is present everywhere and erased from the knowledge of Him who knows all. We can be left utterly and absolutely outside – repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored. On the other hand, we can be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged. We walk every day on the razor edge between these two incredible possibilities.”

- We are to call on Him while He is near. Even though God is everywhere at all times, there are blessed occasions when He makes His presence manifestly known, as in during times of revival. Jesus also promised that “Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am among them.” (Matthew 18:20)
- Another time when the Lord is present in a special way is when we take communion together. During this time, we recall the infinite compassion our Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated when His body was broken and His blood was spilled on our behalf.
- I've talked much this morning about the gulf that exists between our ways and God's ways, our thoughts and God's thoughts, our compassion and God's compassion. We have looked at that gulf from both the negative and the positive.
- A passage in Psalm 103 tells of two more infinite separations that were made possible because of Christ's sacrifice on that cross. Listen, and consider these truths as we prepare to take communion together:

**<sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;  
<sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:11-12, ESV)**

- One final thing to consider...God does not promise us that we can know all of His ways or thoughts. He has revealed some of them in His word, but we can only know a tiny fraction of His ways and thoughts in this life. But what He does promise we can know is his abundant pardon and His infinite compassion and His steadfast love.

- Call on our infinitely compassionate Lord while He is near. When we do, He will abundantly pardon. Let's pray.

**Other Resources:**

- "The Otherness of God" by Matt Redman:  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/septemberweb-only/theothernessofgod.html>
- "The Weight of Glory" by C.S. Lewis:  
<https://www.wheelersburg.net/Downloads/Lewis%20Glory.pdf>