

God, You're Being So Unreasonable!

A sermon based on Isaiah 1:10-18

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Ahhhh!!! You're being so unreasonable!" the teenage daughter screamed at her parents as she ran up the stairs and slammed the door shut. They looked at each other and sighed. This wasn't the first time. Pick your poison...they wouldn't let her stay out past her curfew, they wouldn't let her date until her senior year of high school, they wouldn't let her go to that movie with her friends, they wouldn't let her drive in those conditions, they wouldn't let her leave the house looking like that. Today, it's because they told her she couldn't go on an out-of-town skiing trip with her friends, especially since it was going to be unsupervised and there were going to be boys. Yeah, they were being unreasonable.

You ever have experience with that, on either side of the situation? I'm dreading those days! I'm sure we've all been in a position like that before, either as the parent saying no or the child, angry they can't do what they want (usually having only a limited scope of the situation and potential dangers or temptations). Sometimes, it's difficult to be reasonable, especially when we're not getting what we want.

As we're coming to the end of the church year, we're talking about the end times, thinking about how Jesus will return, and when he returns, he will judge all people. And, of course, we can reasonably think of handfuls of people who will be on the wrong side of heaven when he does his judging. But you and me? That's not what we want, but, as hard as it is to admit, it would be reasonable and just for God to punish us as well.

Do you agree?

I don't think that's what the Israelites were thinking as the prophet Isaiah relayed a rather harsh and incriminating critique of their worship lives...their religious lives.

You notice the way he starts out? "You rulers of Sodom...you people of Gomorrah!" Not a good start. I mean, you know enough about Sodom and Gomorrah, right? The wickedness, the immorality, the corruption, the depravity those two cities were infamous for...two cities who were recipients of God's anger and wrath...totally annihilated...now being likened to the Israelites, God's own people. Those titles were sharp arrows wounding their pride.

The following words of the LORD hurt even more. In them, the heavenly Father revealed his anger toward his children.

Look at these verses. Do you see what the problem was? On the outside, things looked good. They made sacrifices to God. They worshipped him regularly. They gave him their offerings. They celebrated the festivals God commanded them to. They prayed to God. They were doing everything God wanted them to.

But, look at God's reaction: ***"I have no pleasure (in your sacrifices)...stop bringing meaningless offerings...I cannot bear your evil assemblies...[your festivals] my soul hates...I am weary of burdening them."***

Wait, what?!?! They did what he asked, and he was mad? I'm sure many of them thought, "God, you're not making any sense. You're being unreasonable."

But what do you see? It's not hard to see how God wasn't overly impressed by their outward actions...he wasn't impressed by the quantity, either. Do you know what was missing? The attitude/motivation behind those actions. The fact they tried to put on this façade, carrying out these things God commanded them to do, but with sinful motives (probably the biggest motive – I just go through the motions, do this, and God will be happy with me...that's good enough), that?!?! That meant nothing to God. It was a slap in his face.

What about your worship life. Is it any better? Think about it. How's your prayer life? How's your worship attendance? How are your offerings? How are you in worship? It's easy to get comfortable in saying, "God, don't be unreasonable. I'm here (what I would consider regularly). I give offerings. I pray.

But I don't want to know if you're just doing the motions. The Israelites were doing that, and we can see God wasn't happy. Why not? Because, while the outside looked good, the inside did not.

So, let me ask again, how's your prayer life? When you pray, oh let's say, the Lord's Prayer, or before you eat, are they just words off the tongue, or are you really thinking about the words, their meaning, what you are asking God to do? How's your worship attendance? Not just are you here, but are you really here, with a heart yearning to be refreshed by the good news of the gospel, a voice itching to sing your best to God, to praise him for his mighty acts, with a burning desire to encourage your brother or sister sitting next to you in their faith, or are you here, just to make sure people haven't forgotten you exist or so Pastor won't pay you a visit or merely for the social interactions? How are your offerings? Are you giving God your very best, cheerfully, willingly, or is it an obligation, maybe feels like a membership fee or low dividend investment...or maybe you have a leftover mentality.

What angered God with the Israelites...what angers God with you and me are the empty motions...when the outward actions aren't connected with inward, and right, motivation and attitude. He calls that "trampling/disrespecting his courts," "worthless/vain offerings," a "burden/annoyance to me."

And it doesn't even have to be just the way you worship. Look at verse 16 & 17, "**Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.**" Basically, don't just think about your relationship with God, but how are you with others? Are you always showing love to your "neighbor," you know, the second half of the 10 Commandments (do not steal, do not murder, honor your father and mother, do not covet)? And again, are you just going through the motions? Stop sinning. Stop doing evil!

And we look at all of that, God's standards, his commands, and what does our sinful nature lead us to say? "God, your expectations for me are too much! They are impossible to live up to. God, you're being so unreasonable."

Is he, though? Listen to what God says in verse 2, "**I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me...They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.**"

We could spend forever talking about all the good things God has done for us, how he's given so generously and selflessly to you and me. He's the God who has nurtured us and tended to our wants and needs. He's the God who's promised (and kept his promise) of sending a Savior.

And obedience with a godly attitude is what he asks for in return. And if it's not there, his punishment is hiding his eyes from you and me, not listening to us at all. Is that so unreasonable? I think God's got another word for that...just.

You get offended when someone says your name wrong or makes fun of it or ridicules you...but you don't have a problem taking God's name in vain or stomping on his reputation as you sin under the name of "Christian...God's child"...that's unreasonable.

You get frustrated when a friend or your spouse or your child can't make time for you...but 9:15am Bible class, worship going over by 5 or 10 minutes, giving up a Sunday morning regularly to worship, and giving your undivided attention to God, that's not time you can make for him...that's unreasonable.

You have no problem dropping money on the latest toys or clothes or whatever your hobby is. You have no problem volunteering to help a worthy cause in the community....but when it comes to re-evaluating your offerings or helping out at church or a church-sponsored event, you can't be bothered...that's unreasonable.

"Ok, fine, I get it. What I did was wrong. I'm sorry. Now are you happy?" you half-heartedly apologize to your spouse or your parent or your friend (which I've learned does not work)...but you expect it to work for God when you sin...that's unreasonable.

Like it or not, our hands are the ones stained with blood, and God here tells us to "wash and make yourselves clean." The Israelites couldn't do that. We can't do that. And with blood-soaked hands and sin-infested hearts, we deserve hell. That's reasonable.

At the pastor/teacher conference I attended a couple weeks ago, the Pastor/Professor/Doctor who presented talked about times he's sat in church before and listened as the pastor would hammer him with the Law. He said there's been times where he was actually sweating, even looking at his wife, like, "Honey, how does he know all those things? Did you tell him everything wrong I did this week?" And then, with one short, sweet sentence of gospel, the guilt, the fear, the shame...gone.

Martin Luther said something similar, **"This is Scripture's way: first to terrify, to reveal sins, to bring on the recognition of oneself, to humble hearts. Then, when they have been driven to despair, its second office follows, namely, the buoying up and consolation of consciences, the promises. This is how the Holy Spirit teaches."**

Pounded by God's law, we come face to face with all our sins and our all-knowing God who knows those sins, as the Israelites had to here, and we expect the same annihilation as Sodom and Gomorrah endured, to be cast out of God's presence forever.

And a short, sweet phrase escapes God's lips, "Come now." God's law, the majority of these words here of accusation and punishment cause sinners to cringe and hide, but now God invites us to come into his presence as he speaks gentle words of love and forgiveness. This is the gospel.

"Come now, let us reason together." Come, let's reason, or really, let's argue, as if your case is being tried in court...come, let's sit down and hash this all out. We expect the death sentence. God does the unreasonable: **"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."**

God earlier had demanded, "Wash and make yourselves clean." They could not! We cannot. Our garments, our lives are stained with the blood of our sins. True washing can only be the work of God. And this is not amnesty, where our previous sins are simply forgotten and we are provided with a fresh start. No, God's justice requires payment for sin.

And so God made that payment for us. The Israelites' sacrifices and offerings weren't good enough for God. Nothing we can do is good enough for God. But the offering of his Son and the sacrifice of his Son was.

Jesus lived the perfect, pure life God demands, and suffered cross and hell because of it. "Why, what crime has he committed?" Pilate even argued. God, that's unreasonable. That's grace...that God would take our every sin, give it to sinless Jesus, make Jesus suffer ridicule, torture, cross, and hell while we get his righteousness and forgiveness and peace with God...that's unreasonable. That's grace!

And now, because of that, because of Jesus' sacrifice, his life, death, and resurrection, your sins are white as snow. That's easy for us to picture up here. Right after a fresh snowfall, everything looks pure and white. The dormant grass and dead leaves are covered and you only see the beautiful snow.

God does one better. He doesn't just cover our sins. He washes us and makes us clean...and now the sin is gone. To God, because of Jesus, we are white as snow. That's unreasonable. His grace and love and forgiveness defy logic, defy reason, defy what we deserve...but that's grace. For no other reason than he loves us, he saved us and made us white as snow.

Friends, God, in Christ, has done the unreasonable for you and me. Now, we get to be reasonable in how we live our lives, starting now. As Isaiah encourages, we learn to do right to show our thanks.

What does that mean? Simply, stop doing wrong. Stop sinning. And then, learn to do right. God's Word is a great place to start. And here, God's Word tells us to encourage the oppressed, defend the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. In other words, care about your neighbor, especially those who are being taken advantage of. Again, that all falls under the second half of the 10 Commandments.

Our 2nd Lesson for today, from Romans 12, also tells us what's right. The lives we live for God, those get to be our sacrifices to him. When what we do is in line with God's Word and done with a heart of faith in Jesus and love for him, that's pleasing to God. And it's always in view of God's mercy...his unreasonable love for us. That's our motivation.

Going back to the beginning, maybe you once were that teenager. What happened as you grew up, though? Your parents, who were so "unreasonable" were anything but. They cared about you, loved you, wanted what's best for you. That's reasonable.

God's even better. He's unreasonable...in the most wonderful way ever. We're not punished for our sins as we deserve. Our bloodied, sin-filled lives aren't covered up; they're washed clean...white as snow...all because of Jesus' perfect sacrifice.

You know what we say to that? God, you're being so unreasonable...and we can't help but thank you....with our thoughts, our words, our deeds...here in worship...out there in our lives...today, every day, until eternity. Thank you! Amen.