

Isaiah 1:21-26 and John 15:2-3 (DHT)

How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice!

Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.

Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water.

Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves.

Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.

They do not bring justice to the fatherless,

And the widow’s cause does not come to them.

Therefore the Lord declares, YHWH of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:

“Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes.

I will turn my hand against you

And will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.

And I will restore your judges as at the first,

And your counselors as at the beginning.

Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.”

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I AM the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Jesus that does not bear fruit the Father takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

Illustration: Gold Rush

I am not sure if you have heard of this television program, but the Discovery Channel airs a TV show called Gold Rush. It is about these gold miners who go up to Alaska and the Yukon to sift a whole mess of dirt and find what seems to be astronomical amounts of gold. Each episode ends with the three competing teams weighing how much gold they mined that week, culminating in several mason jars filled with gold flakes. But in those mason jars are not just gold. You may also notice a good amount of dirt, mud, and other non-gold objects that through the ages have joined themselves to the gold. The process of purifying these gold flakes requires fire, so the miners will throw all their flakes into a pot and turn the heat up to a ridiculous temperature to melt all the flakes together. This process is time consuming, and violent, yet necessary because its intended outcome is to force all that is not gold to separate from what is

gold. These impurities then rise to the surface to be scraped away by the smelter. This is what is described in our passage about that great city of Jerusalem, the capitol city of Judah, the Southern Kingdom.

Message

We are introduced in the first chapter of Isaiah to two key concepts that reverberate through the remainder of the book: 1) Judah lifted up false worship, and 2) their whole hearts were defiled by sin. The Kingdom of Judah thought she could ignore the LORD’s demands on her; she thought she could have it both ways; she thought she could be specially redeemed by the LORD, yet continue to live as if she wasn’t. She wanted all the benefits of being one of the LORD’s children, yet none of the responsibilities. We see in our passage that things are not how they were intended to be. The consequences of the garden have wrecked havoc on all of creation. We see a once faithful city graphically depicted as an unfaithful bride; a city called to administer justice now deprives justice from the orphan, widow, and all else who need it; a city once marked by righteousness had become full of murderers. *Their silver had become dross*, which is to say it had become utterly worthless. Not just any wine, but their best wine had become diluted with water, and you don’t need to be a connoisseur of wine to know this water infusion has entirely ruined the best wine.

The corrupt religious leaders became accustomed to accepting bribes from the equivalent to Ancient Near Eastern lobbyists and SuperPACs flexing their power. Isaiah also tells us these corrupt religious leaders added rituals and tasks to Judah’s worship procedures. Judah found her joy in forms of worldly celebration rather than in the LORD. Judah fused her divinely appointed worship with other holiday-like, pagan feasts. They offered gifts at the altar with insincere motives. Much like their best wine had been blended with water, Judah’s worship had been blended with other non-worship things. Things are not how they were intended to be.

Judah blended her worship with other non-worship things, and the result was a tainted, defiled, impure, unjust, unrighteous worship, which the LORD rejects. In fact, the LORD not only rejects it, but according to verse 14, the LORD hates it. Because of such false worship, the LORD will extend his arm of judgment to punish their sin. But the LORD does not judge simply to judge; there is always an intended outcome to the LORD’s judgment, and it involves

restoration. Judgment is a painful, yet necessary process to separate the evil that has joined to us so we can be restored.

The once faithful city filled with justice and righteousness had become an unfaithful city through the all-encompassing virus of sin. But after the LORD’s smelting, the unfaithful city filled with injustice and unrighteousness will be restored as the New Jerusalem. Worship that had become tainted, defiled, impure, unjust, and unrighteous would be restored, with the restored worship reaching the nostrils of the LORD as a pleasing aroma. But again, the LORD does not judge simply to judge; there is an always intended outcome to the smelting process—restoration.

The LORD works in these painful circumstances and pressure points of life. We read in our passage of the LORD’s restorative judgment by fire, and this is no new concept in Isaiah. Various passages of Scripture identify heat as a means of exposing sin or revealing truth. Some time ago, I baked a boysenberry pie. The instructions said halfway through, to brush an egg-wash on the crust and sprinkle it with sugar to create a golden-glaze effect. Well, I did that, and I thought I covered the whole crust with egg-wash and sugar—it sure looked like it when I eyeballed it before putting it back in the oven. But to my chagrin, when the pie had reached completion, you could clearly see where the brush had missed the mark—still tasted great though! Heat has a way of revealing what cannot otherwise be seen.

Just as there are non-gold objects that through time have been joined together with the gold, rendering it impure, there are sins that through time have joined themselves to us, rendering us impure. What start out as small problems exacerbate into full-blown addictions. Instead of making it a habit of casting our anxieties before the LORD, we run to vices like alcohol, smoking cigarettes or marijuana, vaping, gambling, over-eating, or bingeing Netflix as relief from the groanings of this life. Or perhaps sin has joined itself to you from an outside source; the seemingly inescapable guilt one feels after being sexually violated; the insecurity of being abandoned as a child; the damage done after a complete stranger who was not even paying attention hits your truck. The virus of sin has joined itself to us through the sins we commit, and also through the sins committed by those around us.

When the heat turns up in your own life, it can be easy to get discouraged or think your faith is weak. But don’t jump to that conclusion so fast. It very well may be that the heat has turned up to smelt away some impurity that remains in you with the purpose of restoring you and purifying you. It is quite a conundrum that as believers our sins are forgiven, yet we still sin.

There are still impurities about us that need to rise to the surface and be revealed—sins that need to be confessed so they can be removed—so all that remains is the purity given to us by Christ.

Just as there is a time consuming, violent, yet necessary process to force those gold impurities to rise to the surface to be revealed and removed, so also the process of removing those lingering sins from us is a lifelong, painful, yet necessary process. Just as the end result of the smelting process on Gold Rush is a purified gold, so also when we enter into the presence of the LORD in that restored New Jerusalem, that holy city, will this process finally reach its completion in us.

But since this process is not completed in us in this life, this does not mean it is okay for us to develop the same mindset as the Jews who Isaiah so forcefully rebuked in these opening chapters. Don’t for a moment think you can ignore the LORD’s demands on you, thinking you can have it both ways. Don’t for a moment think you can be specially redeemed by the LORD, yet continue to live as if you aren’t, wanting all the benefits of being one of the LORD’s children, yet none of the responsibilities. This ongoing process is sanctification, one of those churchy words that simply means to be made holy. You are transformed; you are sanctified; you are made holy not by your own doing, but instead by the doing of the master-smelter.

This brings us to the Gospel of John. *I AM the true vine*, Jesus claims. And all people from all nations are branches, whether they know it or not. They are either fruitful branches or fruitless branches. The fruitless branches are cut off from receiving the life given by the vine; they are gathered as kindling, and thrown into the fire to burn. But the fruitful branches are also cut, but not cut off; instead, they are pruned.

I recently moved to a house out in the country and have been growing lavender outdoors and mint indoors. Well shortly after I became the parent to a mint plant, fires forced me to evacuate from my home for five days. During this time, my AC was off, there was no water, and the temperature was so hot. By the time I returned, the leaves of my mint plant had wilted. Rather than throw it away, I cut off most of the leaves but not all, leaving just an ugly, nearly leafless plant. Well as I continued to nurture this plant, providing it water and sunlight, the plant began to grow even larger than it was before. In order for the branches to produce more life, it required me to cut back, or to prune what was dead. For branches to be fruitful, the vinedresser must care for the vine by removing the death, in order for life to flourish.

And so, in our passage, who is the vinedresser? The Father. Who is the vine? Jesus. Who are the branches? Every last one of you. When Jesus died, one could say the vinedresser failed; God cut the vine back too far; Jesus has been cut off! But that is not the end of the story. The resurrection of Christ was the ultimate pruning success story. Just when you thought nothing was left, up from the grave he arose! Every smidgen of death was removed from Jesus. He was victorious over death. So, every branch shooting off from Jesus receives their nourishment from the life of the Vine and shares in the lack of death from that Vine. The pruning of Christ is extended to every branch shooting from him; as the Father pruned Jesus, so has he pruned you.

Jesus words in John 15:3 have puzzled readers for centuries. It is easy to recognize the necessity of pruning, but those who are pruned are cleansed? What is the correspondence between pruning and cleansing? Have you ever seen a pruned branch? It does not look very impressive, ugly like my pruned mint. This seems like an unlikely pairing. To answer that, we need to see a word-play in the Greek. The correspondence between pruning and cleansing is clearer considering the Greek words are *kathairei* and *katharoi*. Both pruning and cleansing derive from the same root word in the Greek. So pruning the death from a branch is a way of cleansing that branch. An empty or half-full branch is not the end goal of pruning. Instead, the intended outcome of this cutting back is *that the branch may bear more fruit*, that the branch would be full of fruit. Pruning, like smelting, is a time-consuming, painful, yet necessary process to bring forth more fruitfulness.

These two passages may seem strange to pair together. There are no textual correlations between the two. But I have paired them together because smelting and pruning are both critical illustrations of sanctification for those who are in Christ; however, considering just one can paint an incomplete picture. A fuller view of how God makes his people holy necessitates both. You are not just smelted to be made fruitlessly holy, and you are not just pruned to bring forth unholy fruit. You are pruned of lingering sins and negative influences so that you can be a witness of Christ with integrity, so you can be salt in the world, so you can make Christ attractive to those who you encounter. And you are smelted of the sin that hides in the crevices of your life—sin that has so joined itself to you over time—that it seems impossibly hopeless that your sin could ever be removed or that one might dare call you holy.

Gospel Presentation

If you are here this morning, and you are not a Christian, the guilt you feel is real—guilt from the wrongs you have done, but also the wrongs done against you by others, perhaps even by other Christians. You may hear these words and agree that it seems impossibly hopeless that you could ever be holy—after all, who know you better than you? I’ll tell you who: the One who created you knows you better than you could ever imagine. He knows you so well, Paul writes to the Romans, that the Spirit prays for you in ways for which you would never even know to ask.

In our passages this morning, who handed out judgment for sin? Who smelted away impurities? Who pruned? Who cleansed? The LORD only! It is not too daunting of a task for you to be saved, because there is nothing you can do to be saved. Another has already done what needed to be done for you; a man by the name of Jesus from Nazareth who we call the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Centuries before the events took place, Isaiah foretold of this man with excruciating detail. About Jesus, Isaiah wrote: *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities...with his wounds we are healed... the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all... He poured out his soul to death as an offering for guilt, making many to be accounted as righteous.*

The Creator of the universe and all things within knew you from the beginning. He knew of all your guilt and all your sins before he created you, and he knew your sin would cost him his son’s life, yet he created you anyway! Rather than abandon you to your sin, the LORD went out of his way to invest in the time-consuming, painful, yet necessary process of restoring you; purifying you; cleansing you; and making you holy. In this, you can be transformed by the work and plan of the LORD alone.

The NT writers are clear: all who declare Jesus as Lord and believe the Father raised him from the dead are born again! And so, I ask you these two questions: Do you believe in the resurrection of Christ? And do you therefore submit your life to Jesus as your master? Really consider those two questions; they are the most important two questions you could ever answer. If the answer to both is yes, then you are born again. If the answer to both is yes for the first time this morning, please feel encouraged to speak to one of the elders following the service who would love to affirm your first-time-yes by welcoming you into full fellowship within this community of believers, and by guiding you into the life that results from that “yes.”

If the answer to both of those questions is yes, then you are born again! It really is as simple as that. The New Testament writers are clear: those who are born again receive four gifts from God. They receive the complete forgiveness of all their sins, past, present, and future. Those who are born again receive a new heart, which essentially means you receive a new worldview and value system. Those who are born again receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who empowers you right now to turn away from sin and instead turn toward the LORD; the Holy Spirit who empowers you with certain spiritual gifts and abilities to contribute to the service of the global and local Church. Lastly, those who are born again receive the promise of eternal life in the presence of the LORD in the restored New Jerusalem on the New Earth still to come.

Conclusion

It is when we reach this final resting place, the restored New Jerusalem on the New Earth, when the LORD’s restorative work will be complete, as promised by Isaiah in our opening passage, when the People of God who whored themselves to other gods will be restored as the faithful bride. Have you ever considered the audacity of a God who refuses to leave you as you are, but who instead goes out of his way to restore you to himself? The world offers plenty of ideas for how you can transform your life—your marriage, your finances, your car, this or that, just ask Oprah—but only the LORD takes the initiative to remove the cause of everything truly needing to be transformed. This is a lifelong, painful, yet necessary process that he has done for you to completely restore you and free you from the groanings of this world and life, and from the all-encompassing virus of sin.

And it sure would be nice if there was no hardship involved—no masks, illness, job loss, cancer, COVID—but it is in these painful circumstances and pressure points of life when we see the LORD work most in us. *For earthly fathers disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but the [heavenly] Father disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it* (Heb. 12). And so, church, don’t resist or run or hide from these opportunities for growth from the Spirit, but be trained by them, so, like gold flakes in a mason jar and like a wilting mint plant on my window sill, that in life you too may be purified and flourish.

Let’s pray.