Isaiah 1:10-18

10 Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 11 “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. 12 When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? 13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. 14 Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! 16 Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. 17 Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. 18 “Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

As far as we know, it started with Cain, son of Adam and Eve. You know that he was the world’s first murderer, but murder is not all that started with Cain. Turn back the clock a bit further to where his anger began. It started when both he and his brother brought offerings to the LORD. It was clear somehow that the LORD was pleased with Abel’s offering, but not Cain’s. The Bible tells us why: “By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.”

Cain is the first example of something that lives in every sinful heart. It’s the idea that I can find refuge from God’s anger and make him happy with me through religious ritual. Cain thought God should’ve been happy with him because he did the religious thing. It didn't work out very well for him, and thousands of years later, it was not working out well for the people of Judah. The LORD’s blistering words to them, through his prophet Isaiah, convey a timeless truth to us. He tells them, you, me, any sinner, any time anywhere, to Find Refuge in Repentance, Not Religion!

I addressed you a few minutes ago as “friends in Christ.” That’s not how Isaiah addressed his people. He said: “Listen to the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom, you people of

Points to Ponder:

• The people’s problem was that their worship was only ______________ deep.

• One cannot live _____________ and ______________ worship God.

• It’s not religion but ______________ that puts one into a healthy relationship with God.

• Repentance means that we ____________ doing wrong.

• God promises to ______________ our sin when we repent.

• The scarlet and crimson of our sin is found on ______________.
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Gomorrah!" What?! How dare he call them names like that? They were sons of Abraham, God’s chosen people! How dare he compare them to the moral degenerates of those cities. They had the Temple. They offered all the prescribed sacrifices! They observed the Sabbaths and the monthly New Moon festivals and all the annual worship events!

All of that was no doubt true. Everything that the LORD had prescribed in his Ceremonial Law (the worship laws he gave to Israel) -- they were doing. All the rituals and the sacrifices and the festivals, right down to the finest details. I mean, you couldn’t find more religious people anywhere. So how could the LORD have a problem with that? But clearly, he did.

God says. "I've had it up to here with your burnt offerings. Just stop it. They're worthless! They stink! As for your church services -- I hate them, too!" And I won’t listen to your prayers."

Here’s the statement that clarifies what the problem was. The NIV says "I hate your evil assemblies," but literally it says, “I cannot bear iniquity and the solemn assembly.” In other words, those two things do not go together. The people thought that they could go on practicing every kind of "iniquity" and still be worshiping God in their religious rituals. His words reminded them and remind us-- and this is big -- that true worship cannot coexist with ongoing sin. Worship cannot be only skin deep.

Do you think that someone can go on abusing his wife physically, verbally or emotionally, but it's OK because he goes to church? is it OK to look at porn for hours on Friday and Saturday, but it's all right because you worship on Sunday? That you can keep lying to your parents, or stealing from your boss, get drunk, or cuss -- but it's all good between you and God because you sit in a pew and sing hymns? That you can keep on gossiping and slandering people, and be bitter but that’s all fine and dandy as long as you do religious things? “But, pastor, I pray just about every day!” I’ve heard that one a few times, offered to me as evidence of a healthy relationship with God, when the evidence of their lives screams the exact opposite.

Religion is a failed refuge. It didn't put Judah and Jerusalem into a healthy relationship with the LORD; rather, it drew his righteous anger. Amazing, isn’t it, that he was still willing to give them a chance? He was still eager to point them to the one thing they needed to do, the one way they could find refuge from his wrath. He told them, "Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong and learn to do right!"

That is, in one word, repentance. That’s what the LORD demands of everyone: a complete change of mind and heart, and action. Nothing less than a decisive break from sin. “Stop doing wrong,” he says to you and me, too. And he demands even more -- a complete cleansing. But I can’t do that! I can’t make myself clean. I can’t wash my guilt away. All the religious rituals in the world cannot wash away the stain of even one of my sins. How can I possibly become spotless and unstained in the eyes of the Holy One?

That's the Lord’s gracious invitation. “Come now,” he said to them, “and let us reason together.”” Come here, let’s talk about this some more,” the LORD said. “Though your sins are
like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” Those people whom he called “Sodom and Gomorrah” he invited to find peace and safety.

Even though their sins were like scarlet and crimson, God wanted to forgive them. Scarlet and crimson are used to indicate guilt and wickedness. We still use it that way in Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter, or the “red light districts” of a city. We are poor, guilty, shameful sinners.

He urges us to find refuge not in religion, but in repentance. He pleads with us to see our sins as he does, to turn from them to him, believing his promise. He invites us to trust that he washes them away and makes them clean and spotless.

In His anger God is still the Father of his people. By the harsh words and angry voice of the Law he convicts us of sin. There is nothing we can offer him to appease his wrath and persuade him to forgive us. Even our offerings and prayers could not remove sin and make us acceptable to God.

The scarlet and crimson is now found on Jesus. He has taken our blood-red sins and deep crimson guilt from us and placed it upon His own Son. Jesus Christ assumed that guilt and drained the cup of God’s anger to the last bitter drop. The blood of God’s Son was poured out as he suffered in our place, the world’s sin and guilt laid on him, God’s righteous wrath crushing the life out of him. That blood has made us clean, spotless, without stain in the eyes of God. In a word, forgiven! Isaiah himself laid it out for us in chapter 53: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

Did you wonder at the first hymn we sang this morning? (CW 142) What season of the church year are we in? That’s right – Lent. But what section of the hymnal was our first hymn from? The Easter section. Did you think, “O pastor goofed again.” Well, I didn’t. Every Sunday is a mini Easter celebrating the message of forgiveness – that our scarlet stains have been turned white by His crimson blood. The hymn says “All the winter of our sins, long and dark, is flying, from his light to whom we give laud and praise undying. Neither could the gates of death nor the tomb’s dark portal nor the watchers nor the seal hold him as a mortal. But today among his own Christ appeared, bestowing blessed peace which evermore passes human knowing....” Every Sunday Jesus appears to us to proclaim “I forgive you.”

He even forgives us for our imperfect repentance. But we dare not trifle with His grace, otherwise we get back into mere religiosity. We go through the motions of repentance but don’t really mean it. We lay out our sins before God only to take them back as soon as we leave church. That makes us no different than the people Isaiah was indicting.

And you know, dear friends in Christ, it is repentance that turns "religion" into real worship. That’s the worship that comes from faith, from the heart. That’s the worship that pleases God, that smells sweet to him. Our worship, Christians, is not a matter of doing religious things more
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or less religiously. Let our worship be an entire life, lived in gratitude and grace and peace. A life lived by faith in the Son of God "who loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Amen.

✠ Soli Deo Gloria ✠