

The year was 1990. I'm four years old. I'm sitting dangerously close to a 90lb tube TV watching a moving, the same movie, for the 4th time that day, for who knows how many days, for who knows how many weeks. What movie? Why, "Mary Poppins" of course! What a lady, Mary Poppins! Going around making things just right in an efficient, tidy, and fun manner. Not just things, but people. How'd she win the trust and admiration of the children? By singing with gold plated voice to an already spellbound Jane and Michael, "A spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down." She had a way of doing that, of making hard truth heard in an understandable and helpful way. She led Mr. Banks to see how utterly aloof he'd become to goings-on in his own house! He's oblivious to his wife's passion for women's right to vote and his children's longing for simple quality time and attention from him, due to his complete self-absorption. She showed him who he really was and the consequence, not a pretty picture, but equipped him to go forward immediately in a good and very different way. Confrontation. Catharsis. New direction. Wonderful motivation. When she saw this in George, she floated away at the wind's change.

The business of showing people where they're at, diagnosing the issue, and giving medicine to stop the problem and heal is what the prophet Isaiah does with astonishing impact immediately in the first chapter of the book. Don't draw too close an association between the person of Isaiah and the fictional character previously mentioned. Rather, think, really do some thinking, about the truth being brought to light about how the hearers of that truth were doing.

Isaiah slams into his book of prophesy to deliver medicine that has, at first, the complete opposite of a "sugar make it go down easy" taste and feel. What Isaiah says isn't supposed to go down easy. After saying oxen had better sense, Isaiah says to the people of God, "*Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children of corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.*" (**Isaiah 1:4**) Wow! And then he calls them by something sure to only cause offense and grab attention, but absolutely true, "*Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers, of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!*" (**Isaiah 1:10**) "He called us WHAT?!?! WHY?!?" God's prophet Isaiah gave explanation. God leads his prophet to thoroughly and systematically dismantle their entire practice of religion and way of life showing how empty, ritualistic, performative, and pointless it was, how far from the LORD their God their hearts were, even though all God wanted was their hearts. Isaiah confronts, gives clear direction, and restoration.

God would rather see repentance followed by rejoicing in forgiveness more than just about anything else. And God would have it be real, not just the superficial easy to confess and talk about stuff. God wants us to get real honest with ourselves when we hear such portions of his Word, to confess what we're afraid to. To get their attention for this purpose, Isaiah told Israel they were the very rulers of Sodom, people of Gomorrah, the despised looked down upon, the judged people, the destroyed people. What needs to be said to us, how do we need to be called so we snap to it in some ways to really become aware that not all is rosy as we prefer to see it? Listen to John the Baptist's preaching. In what ways are we broods of vipers? Do we have such potential as redeemed children of God? Of course. In what ways haven't we examined ourselves to bear the fruits of repentance which John if he could would say are right in front of us? Listen to the teaching of the Lord Jesus. In what ways are we whitewashed tombs, those who love to be praised in the market place, but inwardly devour widows houses? Listen to Isaiah's prophecy, the words God wants us to hear. In what ways are we those who've spurned God, his grace and generosity? Where have we stopped listening to and living the instructions of our God?

Over the last few years, but more recently for some reason, I've seen memes and videos and such which joke about the different denominations, summing them up in a couple words or a brief sentence. Some chuckle worthy because you're like, "That's totally a thing!" Fun, but there's truth in every jest and I've heard the jests about us, the WELS. The joke is that we think we're better than other groups of Christians because we have it all figured so they are foolish, that we think we're the only ones going to heaven so new arrivals on the tour bus through will have to keep it down when they drive through our section. What do those jokes say about us? Do they mean something? Yes. Is there truth to them? We'd be arrogant to say there isn't. What's the consequence if there is and we just continue? Fewer blood bought souls hearing for the first time or again the truth that they are.

Isaiah's dissection of Israel revealed a bunch of not good stuff. Isaiah said that God simply was filled up with their empty sacrificing, didn't want any more of them! People filled the Temple just to be there at the right time, not to worship and the Lord said he trampled the place by doing so. No more insincere Sabbaths or church festivals either, all done, no more worship if they didn't mean it, he says. Prayer? Forget about God listening because their hands, raised to pray, are filled with blood. What's this look like for us? Where have we been insincere and empty with what we say in worship, just saying it, not really meaning it or living it? Where, when, how have we taken care of self and not other as individuals and a group? We always have blind spots, so when pointed out, what learn to repent of and move on from?

Isaiah, in real sincerity about going forward, initiates this process, *“Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong.”* (**Isaiah 1:16**) Put evil away, just get rid of it, nothing escapes God’s sight. Repent and take the difficult but major first step of not doing evil. Then, *“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.”* (**Isaiah 1:17**) This is what God would see in us, sincere worship, meaningful service. The seeking of right is just said to be done. Isaiah says to do this free from connection to Temple, sacrifice, Sabbath or anything you could associate with a holy place or time. The place where worship happens, he says, is here, your heart, wherever you are, whatever you do, for whomever you do it in spirit and truth. In a sentence, God shows the true all-in, radical love for the unworthy lifestyle as worship he loves to see.

To do so, even to have the first inkling of desire to live the worship God wants to see, all the grace in the world is required. God, the God of all grace, gives it. Isaiah explains how much the grace of God is for them. It’s overwhelming. It’s vividly stated and it’s said directly to you too, *“‘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.’”* (**Isaiah 1:18**) God, after everything is listed that brings his soul the deepest distress, says definitively that he forgives fully and completely. The scarlet sins by blood are removed. We are pure. **I John 1:7**, *“The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”*

We’re sinners. This truth has been made undeniably clear today, I’m quite aware, but the truth of the gospel’s grace outweighs it by far. Jesus taking away your sins in love has greater and better force than anything else. So pleasing is Jesus to the Father that all who believe his Son and love him are forgiven of every sin, have his love and power to truly worship by humbly and sincerely serving. This, God loves to see. Amen.