

“To this one I will look...”

Isaiah 66:1-5

Intro: The late Bill Lewis was once quoted as going to a preacher who was visiting during a gospel meeting and before asking him to lead the church in prayer that night, asked him first this question, “Are you on talking terms with the Lord?” Good question.

How about you? Are there time when you feel your prayers are not being answered? Do you sometimes ask, “What does it take to get God’s attention?”

This week in our study of Isaiah, Brian and I came across what was to me a powerful statement of God’s position. Knowing it will help us all to pray more effectively and with more assurance of an answer.

“To this one I will look...”

This expression tells us that God’s eyes are not turned to all men.

The sentiment echoes the thought of an ancient Psalm 34:15-16.

The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, And His ears are open to their cry. The face of the Lord is against evildoers, To cut off the memory of them from the earth. (Psalm 34:15-16)

It is a certain kind of person that God will answer and bless, and one that He will not. What is that difference?

Not the one who merely builds God shrines

The ancient Israelites imagined that they could earn God’s favor by temples in His honor. Indeed God had commanded them to build a temple; but the temple itself was to remind them of God’s presence and the need to love and obey Him. They forgot the purpose of the symbol and consequently took consolation in the building of a shrine to God. God answered this misconception in v. 1-2a.

Thus says the Lord, “Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? “For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being,” declares the Lord. (Isaiah 66:1-2a)

God’s answer is: What can you build for me that I do not already own?

God is bigger than the world; do we think we can confine Him to a 20 x 20 cubit box? What God is saying is that the temple could never be an actual house of benefit to God, since no one could make one suitable for His actual habitation.

Not the one who merely offers sacrifices while continuing in disobedience

“But he who kills an ox is like one who slays a man; He who sacrifices a lamb is like the one who breaks a dog’s neck; He who offers a grain offering is like one who offers swine’s blood; He who burns incense is like the one who blesses an idol. (Isaiah 66:3)

Again the ancient Jews lost sight of the meaning behind sacrifice. Killing oxen, sacrificing lambs, burning incense were symbols intended to teach the importance of honoring God and seeking forgiveness through repentance. Yet, the same people who did these things were very much involved in the practice of evil of various kinds including participation in pagan worship practices involving human sacrifice, offering unclean things, and worshipping idols. Or it may be that Isaiah is saying that they are as unchanged by their worship as those who are pagans. Either way the message is clear.

What these things indicate is a people who are doing what they do not because God wants them to, but rather because they wanted to. They were concerned about their right to choose, not God's right to choose! They chose their own ways and they were enjoying every minute of it. The fact that God was the casual object of their offerings was incidental.

In response, God said that He too would make a choice. He would choose their punishment! (66:4)

But what does it take to get God attention and favor? To what kind of person does God look?

The one who is humble

God is looking for an inward attitude of humility toward Him. How do we know when we are humble?

When we recognize God's incomparable greatness over us. That He is the creator of all things including us.

When we recognize that there is nothing that we can give Him or supply Him that meets a need of His. That He is not in any way dependent upon us for anything; but instead we are dependent upon Him for everything!

"The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; (Acts 17:24-25)

When we in this dependence pray, seeking His help and blessing in all times of need.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. (1 Peter 5:6-7)

When we accept whatever portion He gives us in life without rebellion or resentment. And we quit making statements like, "I deserve better than this..."

To such a person God will look with favor and exalt in due course.

"God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6b)

The one who is contrite of spirit

If the first attitude reflects our need of God's blessings, then the second reflects our unworthiness to receive His blessings.

Contrition is not a popular human outlook. We tend to magnify our good points and minimize our failings.

Isaiah reflected the true spirit of contrition.

When he was given the remarkable call to prophesy the Lord appeared to him in His holiness.

Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

His contrition is seen in His confession of the sins of the nation.

Thou dost meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, Who remembers Thee in Thy ways. Behold, Thou wast angry, for we sinned, We continued in them a long time; And shall we be saved? For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. And there is no one who calls on Thy name, Who arouses himself to take hold of Thee; For Thou hast hidden Thy face from us, And hast delivered us into the power of our iniquities. (Isaiah 64:5-7)

To such a person God will look with favor and provide forgiveness and comfort.

David knew this and when he committed the grievous sins of adultery and murder in the incident of Bathsheba he said to God in prayer:

For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise. (Psalm 51:16-17)

The one who trembles at His word

If the first attitude reflects our need of God's blessings, and the second reflects our unworthiness to receive His blessings, then the third focuses on the condition of receiving His blessings. If indeed we see God's incomparable greatness and we see our own unworthiness as sinners, then we will "tremble at the word" when He speaks.

Service to God involves a balance of joy and fear. Some tend to take hold of one and some the other; but both are essential. The Hebrew writer called the NT church to this trembling attitude. He reminded them of the fearful God who came down on Sinai and who worked miraculous acts that terrified the on watchers.

But now he says God is still speaking, but from heaven and this should cause us to offer him the most reverent and awesome service:

See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. (Hebrews 12:25)

Isaiah's message is a relevant one.

The ancient Israelites were not the last to think they could earn God's favor by shrines and sacrifices, to buy one's way into heaven by offerings of various kinds that pleased them to give.

It is easy today to get lost in symbols like building cathedrals, shrines or even church buildings that really cater to human glory. And then we may start thinking that we are really doing God a favor by worship ritual. Some time ago I heard this poem that fits well with this message.

“Lord”, I said, “I want to be your man, not my own,
So to you I give my money, my car, even my home.”
And, smug and content I relaxed with a smile
And whispered to God, “ I bet it’s been a while
Since anyone has given so such much, so freely.”
His answered surprised me. He replied, “Not really;
Not a day has gone by since the beginning of time
That someone hasn’t offered meager nickels and dimes,
Golden altars and crosses, contributions and penance,
Stone monuments and steeples. But why not repentance?
The money, the statues, the cathedrals you’ve built,
Do you really think I need your offerings of guilt?
What good is money that’s meant only to salve
The hurting conscience that so many of you have?
Your lips know no prayers; your eyes no compassion.
Oh, but you go to church when church going is in fashion.
Just give me a tear, a heart ready to mold,
And I’ll give you a mission and a message so bold
That a fire will be stirred where there was only death,
And your heart will be flamed by my life and my breath.
I stuck my hands in my pockets and kicked at the dirt.
It’s tough to be corrected; I guess my feelings were hurt.
But it was worth the struggle to realize the thought
That the cross isn’t for sale and Christ’s blood can’t be bought.

Conclusion: “To this one I will look...”