

“God’s Grace Transforms Us”

Isaiah 58:1-12

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Ash Wednesday

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In Isaiah’s day, the temple in Jerusalem was standing room only. They sang psalms, prayed safe prayers, and gave offerings; but, they didn’t let worship trouble their conscience. If they kept their distance from God, they could also keep their distance from God’s hurting children. If they were busy with superficial worship, then they would not feel the need to give up their bad habits and nurture good habits. God told Isaiah. **Isaiah 58:1-12** **“Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast. Shout aloud! Don’t be timid. Tell my people Israel of their sins! Yet they act so pious! They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about me. They act like a righteous nation that would never abandon the laws of its God. They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me. ‘We have fasted before you!’ they say. ‘Why aren’t you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don’t even notice it!’ ‘I will tell you why!’ I respond. ‘It’s because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers. What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord? ‘No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. ‘Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. Then when you call, the Lord will answer. Yes, I am here,’ God will quickly reply. ‘Remove the heavy yoke of oppression. Stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumors! Feed the hungry, and help those in trouble. Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon. The Lord will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring. Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as a builder of walls and a restorer of homes.”**

Isaiah taught. “If you’re only going through the motions in worship, singing the songs but never engaging your hearts, hearing the scripture but not listening for God, giving an offering but

not giving yourselves, then you should stay at home, because you're not doing God or yourself any favors. If you really worship God, then you will share with the poor, listen to the lonely, help those in need and repent.”

They were practicing a safe religion. The people were giving from their abundance, not ten percent of their first fruits from the top of their pay check, and certainly not sacrificially. They were caring for others only when it was convenient. They were helping only the people that did not take them very far out of their comfort zone. They were only loving those who were lovable and not loving and serving their enemies, not loving those they despised, not loving the people with which they disagreed or disliked.

Perhaps worst of all was their feeble love for God. They were splintered trying to worship God and success, comfort, money, and other idols. They wanted to be in control. They were not truly praying. Can one seriously pray for the homeless when they have an empty guest room? If one enjoys an abundance of food and does not give to the food shelf and volunteer their time, then is a prayer for the hungry sincere? Is it a true prayer for peace if one is not trying to rid themselves of dislike, frustration, or hate of another? Is a prayer for comfort and healing genuine if a visit, call, or card is avoided? If we are truly praying for someone, then we need to help them. How honest is a prayer for personal joy if one is not trying to avoid sin? How sincere is a prayer for abundant life if one is not striving to grow their love? We avoid praying about things we don't really want to change. Things that would make the world better, help others and ourselves, but would erode some of what we have acquired, like, and hold onto. Often we are afraid to pray about what we could be and do. Too often we pray safe prayers seeking comfort rather than bold prayers of service, sacrifice, and change. Many of us like what we have—including the vices we have gotten used to. Sometimes we avoid certain prayers because we are afraid God will answer them, that God will reveal our true potential, and that God will work through us to make our prayers reality.

Sometimes one's worship goes flat. They go through the motions but do not really expect or want deep change, repentance, and transformation. Sometimes one will resist becoming a better person, because it means changing the way they live. Some of us want a little repentance, a little turn, but not a full turn from our bad habits to what God invites us to do and become.

We have prayed Psalm 51, the passionate prayer of King David. It is a prayer of painful truth. David is admitting his sin, his need for change. It is a prayer of agony that finds relief in God's grace that forgives and transforms him, leading him to joy.

All of us need the cleansing of confession, the purifying of true prayerful worship, and the transforming of repentance. We need God to purify us, to wash away the choking unhealthy habits, and our sins so we will shine and flourish.

Dust reminds us that without God's love, without the Holy Spirit continually being breathed into our soul, we are mere dust. Ash reminds us of our sinfulness, without God's grace our sin would burn down our life and all of creation. Without God we are smoldering ash, dust that is blown around by the wind. Lent is a transformational journey that takes us from the bad

news of sin, death, grief, pain, and thirst to the extravagant love, abundant life, exuberant joy, flourishing growth, and living water of Easter.

Your worship tonight is an outer sign of your inward desire to repent, to turn your heart fully to God. God is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God is eager to transform all of us.

Perhaps God is inviting you to pray a new prayer or an old prayer with sincerity. Maybe to deepen your discipleship. Maybe to be still in silence more often to get to know God better. Perhaps growing your service. Maybe rejoicing in living your passion. Perhaps loving more boldly. Change is uncertain and takes work. Jesus promises to help you change, to stabilize you when you stumble, to encourage you when you are exhausted. God gives each of us a choice. It is up to us to take the first step, to pray that challenging prayer, to commit to living God's will with passion. If we want to be made well; Jesus will make us well. God's grace is transforming us. Jesus will take us on a journey to glorious resurrection. Amen