

# A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“Dr. Isaiah”

Isaiah 1: 1, 10-18

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Imagine, if you will, First Baptist County Seat in Anywhere, USA. Picture it forty years ago with red brick and four big white columns out front. It's Sunday morning and folks are parking Skylarks and Station Wagons with “authentic” wood-grain paneled sides and walking toward the church as families while bells peel overhead.

Lots of pill box hats and white gloves.

Men all in suits...

Little boys and girls in their Sunday best,  
bearing envelops in purse and pocket.

It's a big day at “First Church.” High attendance day, “Great Day in the Morning.” And they have pulled out all the stops.

They're having a big Sunday School contest. Whichever class has the highest percentage attendance gets recognized in worship. Everyone wins a pin and then gets to have dinner free later in the week at the local steak house called Beef 'n Taters.

If the entire church reaches its goal and breaks the 500 barrier, the pastor has agreed to eat his chicken dinner on top of the church during dinner on the grounds, which will be held immediately after the service. Dinner will be quite the affair... chicken with all the trimmings... sweet tea... a hundred kind of pies... and a local blue grass band that will meander amongst the banquet tables that the R.A.s had set up the day before.

The church had done lots of PR... taken out a full-page ad in the local paper.

Bought some radio time.

And sent calligraphed invitations to former members.

This was a huge day at First Church.

Well, all the preparations worked... the place was packed. Five hundred and thirty-seven people were in Sunday School and there was standing room only in worship. The Minister of Education was just goofy, he was so thrilled. The sanctuary was abuzz with good feelings and enthusiasm as worship began.

Everything was perfect...

A fun welcome by the pastor, asking all the former members to stand and recognizing the young adult men's class as the high attendance winners. They had worked hard and also convinced the entire church softball team to be in Sunday School that week. He called them up on stage and gave them their certificates to “Beef 'n Taters.” He also thanked the Mary and Martha class for the beautiful, massive flower arrangement sitting proudly on the Lord's Supper table.

It was all just great. The choir sang two “specials.” One written for the occasion by the organist and another that was a perennial favorite called “The Beautiful City,” which featured the sopranos in a descant. It brought more than the usual number of hearty “amens.”

The deacon who prayed best prayed...

The drama teacher at the high school read scripture...

The offertory, a really upbeat and jazzy version of “Take the Name of Jesus with You,” even got an applause.

For the icing on the cake, the pastor had invited a guest preacher from a large city upstate. He’d known him at seminary and heard he was speaking as an itinerant now. Well, Brother Pastor introduced him and the folks were so impressed by his credentials.

Son of a preacher who was son of a preacher.

Third generation preacher.

Two PhDs

A stint in a large downtown church.

Advisor to the governor.

Three books.

They were ready for a great sermon.

Then... Dr. Isaiah stood up... put his notes on the pulpit... cleared his throat. **“I prayed a lot about today’s message... so listen up to what God told me to say.**

**You bunch of Nazis... you pornographic, wicked people.**

**Do you actually think all that’s going on here today pleases God? You think God is impressed? God told me to tell you that he’s sick to death of high attendance days. He takes no pleasure in all your busy preparations.**

**The Lord told me to say to you that when you lift your hands in prayer, all He can see are your fancy white gloves. And when you belt your anthems out, all he hears is prideful noise.**

**It sickens God that your worship is confined here to this sanctuary. There are widows in town you don’t know. There are orphans you ignore. There are powerful people mistreating the weak among you and you stand idly by. Your community isn’t a place of fairness and you side with those causing the inequity. And then you come here to this place on Sunday and think your big day is a big deal to God.**

**And worse, you give a little of your leftover time and money and pat yourself on the back... so you can sleep at night.**

**STOP DOING WRONG AND LEARN TO DO RIGHT.**

**God wants you to be engaged with Him... you really are missing the mark when it comes to healthy faith but he can straighten you out. Your hands are dirty with injustice... but God will wash them clean as a whistle.”**

Dr. Isaiah sat down and that was that.

Now, how do you think the folks were feeling? Maybe just like the folks at the ancient temple when the prophet Isaiah’s words crashed their religious party. They were doing their religious duty... incense, singing, sacrifices and all.

They were there with sincere hearts trying to please and appease God. And Isaiah stood up and called them the worst names in the book. By that time Sodom and Gomorrah were the Mutt and Jeff of iniquity. I’m thinking they didn’t like this sermon at all.

They probably reacted like we’d react if a visiting preacher stood up and said... **“You know, I’ve been watching your worship here... I can tell it’s a really big deal to you... so important and meaningful. All these quotes in the worship guide sure are impressive. And you sure have a pretty place here. But... God told me to tell you that your staff**

**reminds him of Al-Qauda... And the rest of you are as spiritually blind as a bunch of clansmen.”**

That was the shocking way Isaiah began his sermon, and it makes me think sometimes we are so asleep to what’s real— a prophet has to say something offensive to get our attention. I think Isaiah’s parishioners were shocked . . . and awake. And if they got past their initial shock, they heard a pretty simple direct sermon, the basic gist of which seems apparent.

**“You folks don’t get it... You’ve got the religious thing down. You can go through the motions of repentance and do the rituals of praise. But it hasn’t changed you. Your forms are fine but there’s no reality. You have some symbols but no substance... There’s no integration of your creeds and your deeds.”**

And the benchmark with regard to deeds was how they responded to injustice and how they dealt with the most vulnerable in their society... the widows and the orphans. That’s how you could tell . . . that’s Dr. Isaiah’s yardstick. It said “The Vulnerable Ones” on the side and he went around holding it up next to the religion and the culture.

And it wasn’t a new idea at all. In the fourth chapter of Genesis, the Bible asked the basic question, **“Am I my brother’s keeper?”** And God kept answering it with no ambivalence all through the ages, **“Absolutely.”**

God’s “absolute” answer echoes through the pages of the Bible. Through the laws of Moses... through the prophets... through the teachings of Jesus and the early church. From Genesis to James, it’s there. **“What is real religion?”** James asks! **“It’s religion that finds a way to care about widows and orphans.”**

And I guess they weren’t doing that back in Isaiah’s time in Jerusalem. So, instead of calling them fellow Jerusalemites he called them **rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrah.**

That conjures up some perverse pictures, doesn’t it? But you should know that while there were clearly sexual perversion, rape, taking place in those ancient cities, the Bible says that the sin that really did them in was lack of hospitality. Hospitality was a sacred obligation... to take care of the one who had no place . . .

the other...

the stranger...

the foreigner...

the homeless one.

So, apparently, when we don’t make a place for the vulnerable who have no place... that’s the sinful straw that breaks the covenantal back. God’s heart is with those folks who have no place. So it isn’t just name calling for effect . . . Isaiah was suggesting to them what the real problem was... they were suppose to make a place for those who had no place.

Those good worshippers down at the synagogue had forgotten that. They saw God’s heart and thought it was dark with vengeful anger and that it needed appeasing... so they burned lots of incense and spilled lots of blood and went home breathing easier but paying no attention to the widow who was begging just outside the temple gates. And Dr. Isaiah reminded them again that they were their sister’s keeper.

And he reminds me of that again today. I went to our web site again this week... and read about how our primary ministry to our community is to provide a place of rest and

peace... a place to encounter God. Words I'd written... and I wondered as I read them again, what Dr. Isaiah would say to me about that?

I don't think he'd tell me that our emphasis on worship is wrong or that our attention to the inner life is misplaced... but he might say,  
**“Be careful... be careful that as you emphasize what happens within these walls, you don't neglect the biblical call to care about the ‘orphan and the widow and the vulnerable and the oppressed’.”**

Someone asked me pointedly not long ago, **“What does DaySpring do?”** I squirmed a bit. And while I expressed our vision and mission that is sacred and simple and healing... here... inside these walls... that question has been bouncing around some in my heart for a few months. **“What does DaySpring do?”**

And then I was invited to a conference about mission trips to work with orphans... and I was asked to consider taking some folks in our church to do something to make a difference.

And then a prospect asked me what we were doing for the widows over at Ridgecrest...

And someone else asked about our connection to the cancer center... And someone else asked about how many DaySpringers were actually involved at the Gospel Café...

And then this text came along and I'm wondering if God isn't trying to speak a word to us. Of course God is... God is always speaking to us and drawing us to the truth. So, what might we all hear? It's simple and direct, the gist is apparent.

**That as people of faith, we are responsible to the vulnerable and that it is our calling to work through the church and through our society make sure they are cared for.**

So, it means when you go into the voting booth in November, you have to take the orphans and the widows in with you. And whomever's chad you punch... you and I need to have explored how it is they propose to care for them. I'm not at all suggesting that there's one party or person that has the right approach to that... Just that as you make your choices... your pocketbook and portfolio....

and your backyard and your benefits  
are not the only things you are thinking about.

It means taking your worship to poles, taking our worship out there, extending the pew... out there. It's the Church's job to be the presence of Jesus. Ultimately, it's not Caesar's job, although we hold Caesar accountable.

And it's not so simple as just responding to every need under the sun... It takes more from us, to listen and to see what our place in the Kingdom's work beyond these walls should be.

But for now... could we at least explore how we might help our neighbors at the nursing home and cancer center? Can someone help us do that?

And can we make a bigger difference in South Waco through the Gospel Café? Would you be a part of that ministry this year?

And can we find one spot in the world to partner with? Some place, somebody that needs us? Can we do that this year? Is there someone here who might help make that happen? Can we do that? Next door . . . across town . . . around the world?

We should... we ought to... in part because the world needs it so. Because it's there... the pain and the need. We should because we're human beings. It's our world and we must respond.

When my kids were little it was bath time and bath time became parable time... for me. I was there by myself, Julie was at a class or something... And the kids were bathing together and Abby was "helping" Brandt... who didn't want to be helped and who was making that known by screaming.

It had been a day... I was tired... And I told Abby to leave him alone and she said, "**I was just trying to help.**" And I said, in a frustrated and loud voice, "**I don't care, leave him alone.**" And I stomped out... tired and stressed... and found myself in the next room cooling off... aware that it was very quiet in the bathroom... too quiet.

Then I heard a wounded but resolute voice... obviously echoing words she'd heard from her mother, now meant for my ears, "**In this family... we don't say, 'I don't care'.**"

We don't... not in this human family but certainly not in the family of God.

We care... We should... we ought to... in part because Jesus tells us to. If being obedient to Christ matters at all... the vulnerable in our world will matter to us.

We should... we ought to... because if we're going to know the Divine... we must know and love the world... and know and love the world as neighbor. In fact, when we love, truly love... fences and boundaries begin to disappear... they fall away.

And the lines emerge.

Connections...

And we see that our backyard extends around the world.

We can't know God apart from realizing the infinite reach of our backyard. And to know God means we'll end up knowing the stranger as brother. This is what happens when we take the time to go next door, or to South Waco, or to an orphanage around the world. We're poured out... and filled up. We find the Eternal. Or... it finds us.

A seeker once asked of a spiritual father, "**Give me a word to live by.**" The father hesitated to do so but finally said, "**Go and have compassion on all. Compassion, he said, allows us to speak freely to God.**"

Anthony the great desert father said, "**Life and death depend on our neighbor... if we gain our brother, if we gain our sister, we gain God.**"

God is love... is an immense, Trinitarian, giving and receiving, movement of love... and when we participate in that loving reality, when we love, we will find ourselves in relationship to God.

We'll know Christ in all we meet (Ware).

And we won't hear the voice of Dr. Isaiah confronting us...

We'll hear the voice of Christ saying to us...

**"Well done, well done, good and faithful servant... now enter into my joy."**

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