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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
October 8, 2017
18th Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Philippians 1:3-5, 18-27; Matthew 20:1-16
Hymns: 351; 373:1-4; 358; 399:3 (248:1-3)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord
and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Isaiah 55:6-9

Seek the LORD while He may be found,
Call upon Him while He is near.

⁷Let the wicked forsake his way,
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
Let him return to the LORD,
And He will have mercy on him;
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.

⁸“For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts,
Nor *are* your ways My ways,” says the LORD.

⁹“For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Limited Time Offer!

We all get them. We get them in our “snail mail.” The envelope
will say “Time sensitive material enclosed” to try to ensure that we

open the envelope and respond while we may still benefit from the offer the company is making in their attempt to separate us from our money. We get them in our “email.” We will be told that this is an offer just for YOU, and that it is good for this week only. All one must do is click on the appropriate icon and you will receive this benefit that no one else (other than the millions of others who got the same “spam”) will receive. We even get them in our text messages; today only I can get this pizza for 10 bucks, today only I can get my photos developed for 50% off the regular price! Basically these deals are all a hustle to get our business.

The greatest genuine limited time offer is from the Lord. Opening this chapter of Isaiah the Lord made this limited time offer:

Isaiah 55:1-3 “Ho! Everyone who thirsts,
Come to the waters;
And you who have no money,
Come, buy and eat.

Yes, come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without price.

² Why do you spend money for *what is* not bread,
And your wages for *what* does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to Me, and eat *what is* good,
And let your soul delight itself in abundance.

³ Incline your ear, and come to Me.
Hear, and your soul shall live;
And I will make an everlasting covenant with you—
The sure mercies of David.

This offer of salvation puts all other limited time offers to shame, doesn't it? So let's hear --

THEME: God's Gracious Invitation.

This gracious invitation is --

I. Waiting for the Sinner's Response NOW

Our text begins by communicating that sense of urgency regarding the people's relationship with the Lord; “*Seek the LORD while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near*” (v.6).

The implication is not really subtle at all. There will be a time when one will no longer have the opportunity to seek the Lord or to call upon His name. That time of grace is dependent upon two things. One is that the individual is still alive on this earth. That is why we at times refer to this life as our time of grace. We can see that people are still alive. We assume that they have ears to hear, because that is in the Lord's hands. You see we also need the presence of the gospel and the power of God the Holy Spirit working through that gospel to seek the Lord and call upon His name. That gospel may not always be available. The Lord can and has withdrawn it from entire nations when there was a drought, not of rain but of the Word of God.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *"We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For He says: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."* (2 Corinthians 6:1-2)

The temptation for people is to put things off until tomorrow. We call that procrastination. I think we are all vulnerable to that fault in one way or another, in one part of our lives or another. We are tempted to think there will be time for that later. That isn't always true. Sometimes even with personal relationships we find out the hard way that we ran out of time. That may be because a loved one leaves this earth. It may be because that relationship withered and died from neglect. That's sad. Procrastination with the Lord's gracious invitation can be far more than sad; it can be tragic. Eternally tragic! **Now** we hear the Lord's gracious invitation. **Right NOW** is the day of salvation!

We might be tempted to think of these words as applying to unbelievers. Isaiah's original audience were living in impenitence. They were still worshiping the Lord on the Sabbath, but they also worshiped other gods, and got themselves involved in all types of sin and immorality. Isaiah was calling them to repentance. They needed to hear that call and respond to that call before time ran out, and the Lord brought judgment upon Judah and Israel. Most did not heed Isaiah's call. Most saw no need for repentance.

We need to apply these words to ourselves. It is all too easy to see how they apply to others, to unbelievers. Good, then let us make sure that we communicate the gospel to them. Or we see how these words apply to fellow Christians who are backsliding in their faith. That's good too. Let us be about the business the Lord has given us to encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ in tending to things spiritual lest they be caught unawares. But let us not neglect to examine our own lives, and how we might attend to our own spiritual concerns. We freely confess, "We daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment." That's what we say in our confession of sins, and it's the truth. So let us be attentive daily to seeking the Lord in His Word, and calling upon the Lord for His mercy and grace that we might grow in grace, and be fortified against the temptations that assail us.

That is where the Lord leads us in our text: "*Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon*" (v.7).

Beware lest we think, I'm not wicked or unrighteous. Our sinful nature, which we all still possess, is wickedness personified. We lust, we covet, we hold grudges we withhold forgiveness, we gossip about those who have sinned against us, we neglect our fellow man. We all intend to help our neighbor, but do we always follow through. We see the magnitude of the need of others, but we are often stingy with our help, even though the Lord is never stingy in His blessings and mercy toward us. So we too need to forsake our sinful ways, and repent, turning away from the ways of the world, and returning to the Lord.

What an amazing grace awaits us. God has mercy on the sinner. God abundantly pardons. Paul stated it so beautifully for us when he wrote by inspiration, "*Where sin abounded grace abounded much more*" (Romans 5:20). Our God will abundantly pardon! Yes, even though we are repeat offenders, "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:8-9).

How can this be? Repeat offenders are thrown into prison and we throw away the key! Indeed, how can this be?!

God's Gracious Invitation --

II. Reveals God's Higher Way.

We read of this wonder of grace in the closing verses of our text.

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts, Nor *are* your ways My ways," says the LORD.

⁹"For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.

We need to consider and appreciate what the Lord teaches us here concerning our ways versus God's ways, our thoughts versus the Lord's thoughts. We need to comprehend the truth that we cannot understand the Lord's thoughts. He isn't man, He is so much greater than we are that we cannot begin to comprehend the wonder of His grace and love toward us. Spiritual thoughts that proceed from the heart or mind of man are different, and in a word, hopeless! Man's thoughts are always about merit and worthiness. Does someone deserve a second chance? How about a third, fourth, fifth, or sixth? When we hear of someone getting that many breaks there is a hue and cry. In the United States many states have a three strikes law. Three felonies and you are locked up for life without any chance of parole, without any chance of redemption. That's man's thoughts, man's ways. The Lord? "*The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9). The Lord would not have the sinner die. '*As I live,*' says the Lord God, '*I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,*' (Ezekiel 33:11).

We don't think like that. No man thinks like that. When we think of justice we think in terms of vengeance. To avoid vengeance we think it terms of merit, not grace. We think in terms of demonstrations of good will and an effort to make reparation for one's wrong. Grace lies behind God's thinking. That has always been God's thinking. It's what led the Lord to be our covenant God that He might secure our peace. That didn't just happen. The Lord had to make it possible. He had to secure our peace. "*The natural*

man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

So the Lord tells us that “when we were **enemies** we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Romans 5:10). Man balks at that gospel truth, and yet that is the truth. “*when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:4-5). That is God’s way of thinking. The Lord didn’t wait for us to prove ourselves worthy. “*Christ died for the ungodly.*” Isn’t that amazing? That’s just not the way people think, but it is the way the Lord thinks of us for our salvation. That passage in Romans 5 says:

“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Yes, people have died for other people, people they thought of as worthy of the sacrifice, a good buddy, a loved one, a great leader or philanthropist, but the bad guy, the murderer the drug dealer, the rapist, -- NO WAY! Christ died for the ungodly. Christ died for us when we were still sinners. “*Jesus Christ ... is the propitiation, (that is the satisfying payment that secures our peace,) the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*” (1 John 1:2)

I would like to think that we only possess higher thoughts now as recipients of God’s grace, but the thoughts and ways of man still linger. Jesus was criticized for going out among tax collectors and sinners to call them to repentance. Where do we look for prospective church members? Is it among the known sinners in society? Do we even include them? Would we welcome them? Do we chiefly look among those who are “already righteous?” May God instill in our hearts a true measure of His grace that our thoughts and ways may be elevated at least a bit closer to that of God’s.

Let us heed God's gracious invitation, appreciating always that this limited time offer has, by God's grace and power included you and me.

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)