

Acceptable Worship

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, August 8, 2010)

Isaiah 1:10 – 20 - ¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom!

Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

¹² When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?

Trample my courts no more; ¹³ bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you;

even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

¹⁸ Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;

though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;

²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Luke 12:32 – 40 ³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ³⁵“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. ³⁹“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he[£] would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Our Gospel lesson last Sunday was about the rich fool who built bigger barns, only to have his life end when he had successfully hoarded all the produce of his land. The message of course was on stewardship, and I challenged each one to consider seriously whether we are hoarding treasures on earth, or whether we are building riches toward God. Did the message make any difference in your life? Did you go home and really think about all the “stuff” you have accumulated, and whether you are building up treasures in heaven? Or did you just think it was a nice message and go home and forget about it?

A pastor often has very little idea how his message can touch people. Were you listening? Did you think about my words during the week? Will you change anything because of the message, or more important, because of the parable Jesus told? A story is told about a pastor of a congregation who had faithfully ministered for many years, but felt that so many of his words had fallen on deaf ears. It wasn’t that his preaching wasn’t appreciated – he had heard many compliments over the years, but he wondered if it had any real impact on the lives of the people. He often felt discouraged because he really wondered if lives had been changed because of his preaching. One day, early in the morning, he had a call from a dear lady in the congregation, an older lady. She told him that she and her husband had been out last evening and didn’t see the evening news. This morning, while her husband was in the shower, she saw on the news that he had won the lottery. She went on to say that she was really afraid that, since her husband was well up in years, the news would come as quite a shock and she didn’t know if he would be able to take it. So she asked the pastor to come over and help break the news to him. The pastor may have been discouraged about the congregation’s response to his preaching, but he treasured the connection he had made with so many of the members, so he immediately went over to their house. He chatted with the lucky couple for a while, and finally came around to discussing the lottery. He asked the husband, “What would you do if you were the lucky person to win the lottery?” The husband thought it over a bit and then replied that they had had a very good

life. They were comfortable, they had no mortgage, and the children were doing well, so if he won the lottery, he said, he would just give it all to the church. The pastor immediately had a heart attack.

Our lesson from the prophet Isaiah this morning almost seems to be at odds with our teaching on stewardship. His prophesy, which is the word of God, says, I have had enough of burnt offerings. Bringing offerings is futile, incense is an abomination. Do not come trampling into my courts any more! I cannot endure your solemn assemblies with iniquity. What is this? Does God not want the Israelites to worship? Does God not want our offerings? This is one of those lessons where you must listen to the whole lesson. Pay close attention to verse 15: When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; (now here is the key phrase:) for your hands are full of blood! We should not take this literally. This has nothing to do with animal sacrifice, or with the brutality which was so common in interpersonal relations in those days. Verse 17 provides the key: Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice, rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan, plead for the widow. In the days of Isaiah, there were many in society who were oppressed, ignored and overlooked. Consider Naomi, the widow who felt her only recourse was to return to the land of her family. The sacrifice of her daughter-in-law, Ruth, can only be understood in the light of the hopelessness of the circumstances of two widows struggling to survive in that culture. Widows and orphans were many in those days, and they had so little reason for hope. The poor were destitute, beyond anything we can even imagine in our affluent society today.

In our day, especially in this country, there are so many alternatives: Pensions often carry over to the widow. Social Security continues to the widow. And Church homes, like our own Piedmont Crossing, or others, such as the Masonic Home and Friends Home, provide comfortable living. We have children's homes, like Nazareth Children's home, and foster care programs and adoption agencies such as Elon Homes, so that orphans being abandoned in the streets has become quite rare in our society. We can slip into the comfortable feeling that we have done so much to protect the oppressed and disadvantaged, that we no longer have any need to be concerned about such things or do anything about them. But many of our solutions are impersonal and narrow in scope. First of all, there are many widows and orphans in our world today, crying out for our help. We need to always look beyond our own town and our own borders to recognize the needs of others. I am very pleased with the support we generate for Church World Service, OGHS, Heifer, and other outreach activities, such as our "adopted" children in Botswana and the Philippines. But we can and should do still more. Beyond our gifts, widows need more than social security and financial income, and orphans need more than a place to sleep and three squares. The disadvantaged in our society need a personal investment. The poor need more, much more than money. How can the widow live comfortably, even if there is sufficient funds, if she never learned to balance her checkbook? How can the homeless person become settled into a home, even with all those wonderful programs of Greensboro Urban Ministry, if we don't teach them how to manage a household and fix things around the house? How can a young person ever break away from the gangs on the streets, and become integrated into society, if we can't convince them that they are valued as persons, not for the damage they cause or the pain they inflict on others, but just because they are a child of God?

I hope you were listening last Sunday, or if you missed it, just read the Gospel lesson from last week. And then take some time to examine your giving to God. Each one of us needs to consider what it is we are putting in that envelope. But equally important, when you bring your offering, when you place your envelope in the plate, what do your hands look like? Have they been busy in service to those in need, or are they "full of blood" as Isaiah would have said. Have your hands been busy serving God and showing love to others? Or in the words of Isaiah's prophesy, have you failed to seek justice and rescue the oppressed?

Jesus spoke so lovingly to his followers in our Gospel lesson: Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. It might seem that Jesus is going into another discourse on stewardship, as he did last week with the parable of the rich fool. He begins that way: sell your possessions, give alms, lay up treasures in heaven, and let your heart be on those treasures. But then he goes on with the parable about remaining alert. We might interpret that as an admonishment to always be giving and sharing your resources, but I would suggest that is also an admonishment to be good stewards of your time. Remain alert, be prepared to give of your time to the Lord. Always be ready to open the door when the master comes to you, even if he comes in the form of one who is in need. Be prepared, be ready to help, to invest your time and energy, whether it be in the middle of the night or near dawn or at midday. Doing such acts of mercy are not only the way to prepare yourself to inherit God's kingdom, but they become the way to purify your hands so that you can worship God in an acceptable manner. Purify your hands to receive the grace of God, and with purified hands, when you lift them to God in worship, He will receive your offerings, your worship and your praise, and at the last, receive you into the banquet being served in God's house for those who serve him.