



Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

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Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

Thus says the Lord: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. . . .⁶ “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”⁸ The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.”

A few weeks ago, my family and I were in Milwaukee, WI, on vacation. And a revelation struck me while driving around the town that has struck me almost annually for the past nine years. And that revelation is this: even people in Milwaukee can be bad drivers.

That might not sound like much of a revelation to you. Well, let me give you some background information. I grew up in Milwaukee, the southside suburbs to be precise, and that is where I took driver’s ed and learned how to drive and got my license. I never really did much driving around Milwaukee *myself*, because I went to high school in Eau Claire, and before too long my parents moved to Eau Claire also. And pretty soon after that, I was married and had moved to Florida.

And as pastor of a very spread-out congregation in Florida, I did a *lot* of driving around that state, and one thing became very clear to me: people in *Florida* were bad drivers. Not *me*, because I wasn’t like them. I was a Milwaukeean, I was from Wisconsin, which meant, of course, that I was a *good* driver.

And then, several years later, I was pastor in St. Louis, and served a similarly spread-out congregation, and my travels regularly took me through Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas, and I discovered on my long and frequent drives that people in Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas—and *particularly* around St. Louis—were all bad drivers. Not me, of course! Because *I* was from Wisconsin. I learned how to drive in Milwaukee. And like *all* the fine folks of Milwaukee, I was a *good* driver.

The problem I kept running into, pretty much annually, was that every time I was driving to Milwaukee to visit family, I realized to my great horror that people in Milwaukee could be bad drivers *too*. And I was reminded of that just a couple weeks ago. And just a couple weeks ago, when I was driving around Milwaukee and reminding myself once again that it was not this utopian paradise of excellent motorists, I found myself doing something else.

I could no longer pretend that all the people of Milwaukee who were *so much like myself* were all good drivers. And so, as we were driving around those busy roads, constantly confronted with *bad* drivers, I found myself mentally recording the reasons why all those bad drivers were *not* actually so much like myself. I noticed that some of them were of a different skin color. Some of them were women. Some were old and should have had their licenses revoked. Some were young and selfish and reckless. Some drove by and from the stickers on the backs of their cars, I could tell that some of them were of a different religion—some were Atheists. Some, I could tell, were of a different political persuasion than I, and so *not* fine upstanding citizens like me. Worst yet, some of them were Chicago Cubs fans! I was pleased to realize that not one of those bad drivers was like me *at all*!

That is *exactly* what I was thinking. And I'm not lying to you. As foolish and as childish and as prideful as this all makes me sound, I'm not lying about the way I think. I'm confessing. Because it is foolish, isn't it? And if you pay close attention to the way that *you* think about other people, I'm guessing that you will likely find the same foolish and childish and prideful, divisive tendencies within yourselves.

This is what we do. We see a behavior or an action or a trait that we would *not* want to associate with, and we make distinctions between us and them to divide us from any sort of association or any sort of guilt or any sort of blame. Even when we sin *in the same way* as someone else, we make mental distinctions that prove that we're actually *better* than them, even though we're doing the same thing. So, if I ever drive poorly, it's not because I'm a bad driver or reckless or selfish or oblivious or foolish—no, I'm not like *them*! I probably just have something important I have to get to, or maybe it was someone else's driving that caused me to make that maneuver, or maybe my kids in the back seat were distracting me! It's not that I'm a *bad* driver!

We believe that we are good because we are the way that we are, and we pretend that other people are not, because—well, they're just not like us at all. This is what we do. In pride, we divide.

We've got a lot in common with the Jews of Jesus' day. Of course, our text for this morning isn't written to the Jews of *Jesus' day*, it's written to the Jews held captive in Babylon some 600 years *before* Jesus' day. But these words *are* written *about* Jesus' day. ***"Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed."*** That's Jesus. God's salvation, the Lord's deliverance—it would be coming *soon*, the Lord promises, in Jesus.

And that had been the theme of the previous ten chapters leading up to this. Back in ch. 46, the Lord had promised, ***"I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion."*** (46:13) In ch. 51, ***"My righteousness draws near,"*** the Lord promised. (51:5) And then the details started *coming* about how this would take place. The Lord's salvation would come in the form of a Servant who would not hide His face from disgrace and spitting (cf. 50:6), a Servant that would be despised and rejected by men (cf. 52:3), a Servant that would be pierced and crushed and chastised and wounded (cf. 53:5), and through it all He would remain silent like a sheep to be sheared. (cf. 53:7) But while doing so, He would bear the sin of us all. (cf. 53:12)

And the results of this coming salvation would be the invitation right before our text, ***"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! ... Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."*** (55:1, 7)

Judah had been locked away in Babylon's dungeon *because* they had departed from the Lord, *because* they had forsaken Him in favor of foreign gods and foreign powers. They divided *themselves* from God, so God made the lights go out, and the doors were slammed shut. That is until a sliver of light started peaking through into their dark prison cells by the pen of the prophet Isaiah. And he gave to them this *glorious* glimpse of the events that they would not live to see—salvation brought near and gifted freely to them at great cost to God and at the Son of God's expense. The sin and the walls that had divided them from their Lord would be torn down! The Lord would gather them to Himself along with all people of every nation who would call on the name of the Lord and receive His mercy.

And after sharing all that with them, the Lord gives them this simple directive: ***“Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.”*** And how could they not?! Keeping justice and doing righteously would be the *least* they could do in response to this freedom, this free salvation! How could they not let this light shine all around them to all the nations?

But when that day finally arrived, when God’s Salvation finally appeared and walked among the Jewish people, they had embraced the lie that they could keep the Lord and His blessings to themselves. They took this idea that they were God’s chosen people and twisted it to mean that they were *better* than other people, that it wasn’t *mercy* that they had received but their rightful due! And so, in pride they’d look down on the foreigner in their midst, even if that foreigner believed in the one, true God. They divided themselves from the nations, not wanting to associate with them at all, and so actively resisting God’s plan that His ***“house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”***

And Jesus quoted that verse to them. He stood in the temple, in the Court of the Gentiles. It was an area of the temple that God had set apart for the Gentiles *specifically*. There were these divisions in God’s design of the Temple. You had the Most Holy Place which no one could enter except the High Priest once a year. You had the Holy Place—only the priests could go there. You had a place for Jewish men, a place for Jewish women, and then you had a place where the Gentiles could come to worship.

This design was intended to teach a few different things, but God did *not* design it this way to suggest that He did *not* want the Gentiles there. He put a court for them there because He *wanted* the world to know that He is the God of Jew and Gentile alike! That He wanted *all* people to come to Him. That His promises were for *all* people; that His Savior would die for the *world*. So He gave them a place.

But in Jesus’ day at least, the temple rulers—they didn’t really care. They had set up shop in the Court of the Gentiles. They didn’t want to use the *Jewish* area for business, and they didn’t want to have to *leave* the temple. They wanted things to be convenient, to be able to set up shop right there in the temple, and to have their sheep and their goats and their cattle so that people could buy them right there, and their money changers—it must have felt like a marketplace in the Court there where the Gentiles had come to worship. Imagine if Our Redeemer down the street here decided that they were out of storage room, and so they just started storing all their Christmas decorations and their bathroom supplies and their office supplies—just stored it all here in our sanctuary where we worship. That’s basically what was going on in the Court of the Gentiles, with a lot more noise on top.

By doing this, the people displayed that they did not *care* about the nations. That the nations did not matter. And when Jesus saw this, He was furious, and He quoted this verse: ***“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.”*** (Mark 11:17) It wasn’t *just* what they were doing, conducting business, but also *where* they were doing it, in the court of the Gentiles, actively militating against God’s desire to gather *all the nations*.

A perfect example of this is found in our Gospel reading. A Canaanite woman came to Jesus. Think of that, a *Canaanite*. A descendant of that group of people that God had told the Israelites to drive *out* of the land because they were so wicked. And now for like a thousand years, they and the Israelites had been mortal enemies. And *she* came to Jesus. She called him ***“Son of David.”*** And she came without any pride, without any enmity, without any hostility; she came to ask Him to save her daughter,

because He was the only one who could. And she believed firmly that He *would*, because she believed that the King of Israel was not just for Israel. The disciples weren't so sure! But *she* was right.

Now, at first, Jesus pretended that she *wasn't* right. He pretended that He was deaf towards her, as if He did *not* care. And then He said what sounded like, "You're not an Israelite, why *should* I care?" And then He called her a dog! (And honestly, this all sounds like what we do in pride, to divide ourselves from others, but Jesus does all this in mercy to gather her in.) Undeterred, she keeps on in faith, because she knew the Word of God. And she knew what God had promised. And she knew who Jesus was, and she knew Jesus was for her. And Jesus' responses to her, divisive as they seem—He was doing this in order to call forth her faith, in order to prove to her and to the disciples and to you and to me that His desire is to gather us, even *all people*, to Himself.

You see, God is an equal-opportunity Savior. He does not care about race or height or age or occupation. He doesn't care about who you've been *or* what you've done before. There is only one thing that matters to God, only *one* thing that is the basis for fellowship with Him—for being gathered together with Him—and it is not you! That one thing is *Him*. *His* mercy. *His* love. *His* forgiveness. *His* righteousness. *His* salvation. He *gathers* the peoples to Himself. He gathers the outcasts of Israel, and He gathers others as well. Even the foreigners who come are welcome.

Now this does *not* mean that *every* person is saved. All are invited, but *no one* can come just as they are, not us either. Thankfully, we have a God who not only overturns tables and upsets chairs, but even a God who removes any kind of restriction and obstacle that might prevent people from coming to Him. He removes stoney hearts and replaces them with hearts of faith. (cf. Ezekiel 36:26) Hearts that cling to Him and His salvation. He removes sin that would separate, and replaces it with His righteousness, the very righteousness of Christ, the Lord's salvation.

This is why there is room for you in the Lord's house. This is why there is room for me. This is why we will not be rejected but will be welcomed and accepted. And if there is room there for all sorts of people in *God's* house, then there certainly ought to be room for all sorts of people here among us.

We all know what rejection is like. I suspect that most of us have experienced it once or twice in our lives. And we all know how much it hurts to be rejected. Our world is *filled* with restrictions and exclusions and divisions and dividers and barriers. I pray that we will not add to this, by raising up any sort of prideful dividers and barriers that might cause someone to stumble and fall away from their Savior, because they feel that they are rejected. That is not the way of the Lord.

Let us never forget that the reason we are here is because God shows *us* mercy. In response to that mercy, may God help us to keep justice, and to do righteousness—to be merciful—***“even as [our] Father is merciful.”*** (Luke 6:36) Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.