



+ **YOU**

Fall 2023

Staying True in a World Far From God

Sermon Title: The Great Invitation

To be used with Session 5: Confess Wholeheartedly

Scripture: Isaiah 55:6-11

Connection with Bible Study: To complement the Bible study “Speak Truth Boldly,” this sermon will build upon the study’s main point that confession and repentance keep us close to God.

Introduction: When I was in seminary, I read some portions of John Calvin’s commentary on Romans. He’s mainly remembered for his views on the sovereignty of God, human depravity, and predestination. I also read Martin Luther’s commentary on Romans, and to my surprise, his views on those topics were not much different from Calvin’s. In fact, Luther’s commentary prompted a response from the Catholic theologian Erasmus. It was titled “The Freedom of the Will.” This prompted Luther to write a lengthy response to him, and it was titled, “The Bondage of the Will.” It’s considered one of Luther’s greatest works.

One of the great paradoxes of the Bible is the fact that it teaches both God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. This paradox is not limited to the New Testament. You find it in the Old Testament, too, and this section of Isaiah is a case in point. The apostle Paul quoted from the Psalms when he said, “There is no one who seeks God.” Yet in this text, Isaiah clearly told the people to seek the Lord. If no one seeks God, isn’t this a rather hollow command? As always, it all comes down to context. The psalmist was referring to pagans who were completely alienated from the true God. Isaiah, however, was addressing a nation to whom God had revealed Himself. He had made a covenant with the nation of Israel through His law, but they had long since broken that covenant. Now God was inviting the people to return to Him through confession and repentance.

1. The reality of this invitation (Isa. 55:6-7).

a. The invitation was real, but there were conditions attached (v. 6).

Did this mean a time was coming when God would no longer be found or near? Yes, that’s exactly what it meant! Mind you, the Bible teaches that God is everywhere all the time, so in that sense, He is always near us. However, He’s not always near us in the sense of being available (Isa. 59:1-2). God was willing to show mercy at this time, but the people didn’t need to take His mercy for granted. A day was coming when He would not be so merciful.

b. God wanted them to seek Him by repenting of their sins (v. 7).

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“Repent” is a dirty word in many churches today. They’ll talk about receiving Jesus and about God’s mercy, but they don’t like to talk about repentance. Yet you can’t deny the importance of this word to the early church. When John the Baptist began preaching at the Jordan River, he called on people to repent. When Jesus began His public ministry, He preached the same message as John: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” When Peter preached at Pentecost, the crowd cried out, “What shall we do?” Peter said, “Repent!” When Paul made his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, he recounted how he had preached “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.” That’s not to deny the necessity of faith in Jesus, but faith and repentance invariably go together.

c. Jesus does not merely save us from the penalty of sin, but from sin itself.

This doesn’t mean followers of Jesus are perfect. We still struggle with temptation, and sometimes we fail. The temptations of this world are real, and if the devil knows you have a weakness, he’ll hit you there every time. I’m not saying followers of Jesus are perfect, but I am saying true followers of Jesus have no love for sin. If you don’t even have the desire to abandon sin and do what is right, something is terribly wrong. Yet isn’t it great to know that when you truly repent, God will abundantly pardon!

2. The reason for this invitation (Isa. 55:8-9).

a. God told the people, “My thoughts are not your thoughts” (v. 8).

This verse is often taken out of context. It’s true that God’s ways are often hard for us to understand, but the context indicates that God was talking about His moral standards. In other words, Israel’s sins didn’t seem so bad to them, but that’s because they couldn’t see them from God’s perspective. People make that same mistake today. They don’t think there’s anything wrong with sex outside of marriage, cheating on a spouse, or homosexuality, so why would these things matter to God? God’s reply to them is the same: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways.”

b. How different are God’s ways and thoughts from ours? (v. 9).

Today we know the universe is much bigger than the people in Isaiah’s day could possibly have imagined. Yet how much bigger is the God who made it! In spite of all we know about the created order, some people are still foolish enough to think they know better than God. They think they can re-write His Word according to their own whims. Other people think they can do enough good works to bridge the gap between them and God. They’d stand a better chance of building a ladder that reaches to the end of the Milky Way! Ah, but that’s why the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news. We couldn’t reach all the way up to God, so He reached down to us with the blood of His Son.

c. People today still think they know more than God.

I recently read a book titled *Another Gospel?* by Alisa Childers. It focuses on a movement that’s taken hold in recent years called “progressive Christianity.” People who are caught up in it want to redefine sin for our modern age. They also deny the

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existence of hell. They say such ideas are contrary to the teachings of Jesus. (Never mind that most of what we know about hell comes straight from the mouth of Jesus!) Many of them say, "I could never inflict that kind of punishment on an animal, let alone another person, so why should I believe God would do anything like that?" In other words, they think that, if God was as good as they are, then He would never send anyone to hell! Yet God still says, "y thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways."

3. The reliability of this invitation (Isa. 55:10-11).

a. Isaiah used rain and snow as an illustration (v. 10).

Rain and snow can be an awful nuisance. Rain can disrupt your plans, and snow makes travel difficult. Be that as it may, both serve an important purpose. Can you imagine what would happen if we had neither rain nor snow? Vegetation would dry up, and the animals who feed on that vegetation would starve to death. The crops in the field would also wither and die, and then we'd starve to death.

b. Like rain and snow, God's Word does what it was intended to do (v. 11).

God's Word tells us who He is and what He is like. It tells us how He revealed Himself to this world, first through the nation of Israel, and then through His Son Jesus Christ. It tells us what God expects of us. It tells us the difference between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood. It also warns us that we have broken God's laws, and therefore we are under His judgment. Ah, but it also tells how Jesus died for our sins, paying the penalty we deserve. Through repentance and faith, we can receive mercy and forgiveness.

c. This means you can trust God's promises.

We're coming up on another presidential election. Politicians are good at giving their word, but their word often returns void! When God says something is going to happen, you can count on it. You can believe Him when He says there will be a judgment for sin. You can believe Him when He says there's an eternal punishment for sin. Many people don't believe these things now, but one day they will believe it. I firmly believe this will be a large part of the torment of hell. People will be reminded of how they foolishly rejected God and His Word. They will cry out for mercy and receive none.

Conclusion: Several years ago, I received a lengthy letter from a man who had recently attended one of our services. He took me to task because I gave an invitation at the end of the service. Among other things, he said a public invitation can mislead people into thinking they're saved when they're really not. I agree that there's a lot more to following Jesus than walking down the aisle in a church service. So why do I still give a public invitation? Simply put, I do it because it's biblical! After all, I'm not the one who's inviting you to come to Jesus. God Almighty invites you, and I'm simply giving you an opportunity to respond. Will you come to Him today?

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Ken Jones is the pastor of Worsham Baptist Church in Farmville, Virginia. He holds a B.S. in history from the University of Tennessee at Martin and an MDiv. from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary.

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