

**SERMON**  
**ISAIAH 55:6-9**  
**GENTLE AND LOWLY: HIS WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS**  
**SUNDAY, 8 JANUARY 2026**  
**FPGJ**

**Opening Prayer**

Today – we are continuing with the series that is focusing on the *gentle and lowly* heart of Jesus. As a guide for this endeavor, we have been looking at Dane Ortland’s book *Gentle and Lowly*.

We are now in the third week of what is basically a mini-series within the series: a four-week look at how Jesus—our Gentle and Lowly Savior—relates to the God who is revealed in the First Testament/Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament). In the first week of this mini-series, we heard how we must resist the temptation to think that there is a *chasm* between the revelation of God in the First Testament and God-revealed-through Christ in the Second Testament (or New Testament).

We also heard that must be on guard against the church’s long-held practice of subordinating the Old Testament to the New Testament – We need to let go of the *way we often use* the language of promise and fulfillment—as if the First Testament is merely a rough draft and the New is the real thing. Instead, we need to *recalibrate* our thinking and see that rather from going to the “old” to the “new”, *both* parts of our bible are pointing *inward* – towards Jesus Christ. Jesus and Jesus *alone* is THE word of God to whom scripture points.

Last week, Tom skillfully led us through a *crucial part* of the First Testament – a famous passage from Exodus 34—as he said, the most quoted part of the bible *by the bible*, in which God reveals His *character* to Moses. Let’s hear that again—because we always need to hear it again:

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***The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children  
and the children’s children,  
to the third and the fourth generation.”***

As Tom said, In Exodus 3, God gives Moses the divine name—very important—but here in Exodus 34, God gives Moses the divine *character*.

Merciful. Gracious. And most crucially, *slow to anger*. I think we would all greatly benefit from hearing last week’s sermon on a weekly basis. I agree with Tom that in the current state of our country, I am not sure there is a better

witness for Christians to have than being *slow to anger*. Left to our own devices, I don't think this is an attainable goal right now—*left to our own devices*. Our 24/7 news media, our instant access to information, and the emotional pressure cooker of social media and its demand for instant reactions *all actively conspire against* our calling to imitate God by being “slow to anger”. But for those who lean on God, who trust in the power of the Spirit, it is possible to become *slow to anger* to respond with love, even tempted by the heat and quick release of losing our temper.

As we have heard, Exodus 34 is a crucial passage of scripture because it reveals the heart of God's divine character. But it is not the only place in the First Testament when God does so. In Today's passage from Isaiah 55 (or as my Scottish friends call it, “Eyes-aye-ah”), we see more aspects of God's loving character.

One of the most famous parts of Isaiah 55 is verses 8 and 9, which say:

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***For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.***

But we can also run into trouble here, if we are not careful. In his book, Ortlund points this out on page 155. All too often, when Christians are

confronted with grief—our own, or the grief of others—we tend to seek a strange sort of refuge in the mysterious ways of God. “God’s ways are not our ways”, and so on. Another variation of this occurs when we experience some form of suffering, and we say to ourselves—or even worse, to others—“well, God is still on the throne.” I *really* wish that Christians would stop saying this! I know it is well-meant, and I know that it is *theologically true*—but it is usually pastorally harmful. When we use this kind of response to pain, or when we quote Isaiah 55:8-9 out of context, we get a picture of God who is distant, aloof, or uncaring.

As Tom has said, how and what we think of God is the most important thing about us, because it profoundly shapes who we understand ourselves to be as human beings. I think it is also important because of our concept of God also shapes how we treat *other* human beings (and animals, and creation—but maybe that’s a sermon series for another time). Personally, I do not see how *anyone* can flourish the ways that God wants while also viewing God as distant, aloof, or uncaring.

This is why we *must* pair Isaiah 55:8-9 with what comes before in verses 6 and 7. Let’s see these two verses up on the screen:

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***Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them***

***return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.***

As Ortlund says, these verses *completely* change the meaning of verses 8 and 9. Rather than showing God to be distant or uncaring, these verses give crucial meaning to the higher ways and thoughts of God. Let's put all the verses back together again:

***Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.***

So in this passage, there is a key word, and it is *right* at the start of verse 8. What is the very first word in verse 8?

**For.**

Now, when we read the Bible, we should *always* be on the lookout for two *specific* words:

**1. For**

## 2. Therefore

Whenever we see *either* of these words in our bible, we should stop, grab something to write with or a highlighter, and make note of it. Why?

Because those two words—*for* and *therefore*—tell us that what we are about to hear is **connected** to what came before. They tell us that the Bible is not tossing out disconnected spiritual platitudes but instead is making an argument with a clear line of reasoning.

So when verse 8 begins with “*For,*” it is not changing the subject. It is explaining it. It is telling us **why** God can be trusted to show mercy, **why** God can pardon so abundantly, **why** return is possible at all.

In other words, verses 8 and 9 are not a theological shrug. They are not God saying, “*human beings wouldn’t understand.*” They are God saying, “*human beings wouldn’t do this.*”

We wouldn’t forgive this freely. We wouldn’t keep the door open this long. We wouldn’t keep welcoming people back after they’ve wandered so far.

That is what makes God’s ways higher.

God’s thoughts are not higher because they are colder. God’s ways are not higher because they are harsher. They are higher because God’s mercy

exceeds our moral imagination. We assume forgiveness must be earned. God says it is offered. We assume mercy has limits. God says it is abundant. We assume return must come after we fix ourselves. God says return is what makes healing possible in the first place. This is not abstraction. This is explanation.

Some years ago, I heard the following quote from Tim Keller, who founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City:

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**“We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”**

This is a wonderful summary of the heart of the Gospel. This is what we are presented not just in Isaiah 55, not just in the Gospel narratives, but throughout the *entire* bible.

Left to our own devices, though, we don't want to believe it. It might seem too grand, or too good to be true. One of the greatest afflictions that we face in the church is not that we think too much of God—it is that we think *too little* of God.

In my own faith journey, C.S. Lewis has played a central role. In his remarkable essay “The Weight of Glory”, Lewis gives frank and wonderful expression to our very human tendency to think *too little of God*, and too little of what God truly wants for each of our lives:

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**“It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”**

We are half-hearted with ourselves, and we then *project* that onto God, and assume that God must be *just like us*. The great reformer John Calvin—I mentioned him the other week—once quipped,

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**“The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols”.**

This is a sobering quote, and it means that left to our own devices, we are *continually trying to make God into our own image. We are trying to stop God’s thoughts and God’s ways from being higher than ours.*

As you will know by now, I am a big fan of...Karl Barth (I bet you thought I was going to mention a certain football team). Here is a picture of Karl Barth, so you can see who I am always talking about.

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I am going to tell you a story from Barth's own life. Don't tune out or fall asleep—it's not dry theology (as if such a thing exists!), but a story that ties in with the truth of Isaiah 55:6-9, and is quite relevant for our own time.

It was August of 1914. Karl Barth was a young pastor, only a few years out of seminary, serving in the small industrial town of Safenwil, Switzerland. He had studied theology under the great German professors of his day—luminaries of the Protestant tradition.

These were the very teachers who had shaped his mind, who had convinced him that Christianity was true, was meaningful for the modern world, that the gospel was the essential message of salvation for every place and time. He admired them. He trusted them. He thought of them as spiritual fathers.

And then the Great War came – WWI.

When the German leader Kaiser Wilhelm called the nation to arms in August 1914, ninety-three of Germany's leading intellectuals signed a manifesto supporting the war effort—professors, philosophers, even Barth's own

theology teachers. They draped the violence of the Kaiser in the robes of God's providence. They claimed the German cause as a Christian cause. For these thinkers, there was little to no daylight between the ideals of German culture and will of God.

Thinking back on this experience, Barth it was as if the ground had given way beneath his feet. If his teachers could so easily confuse the will of God with the ambitions of empire, what did that say about the theology they had taught him? What did it say about the Christ they had proclaimed? If the Good News of Jesus Christ could be twisted into nationalist fervor, then, Barth concluded, it was no gospel at all.

Barth called this moment his "theological Rubicon." After this crisis, there was no going back. The faith he had inherited had collapsed under the sound of marching boots. And so Barth began to rebuild his understanding of the Christian faith—not with culture, not with national pride, not with politics, not with human wisdom, but with the living Word of God. With Scripture—with the strange, untamed reality of Jesus Christ.

Even though that rupture was exceptionally painful for Barth, even though it cost him some influence and many friendships, it also gave birth to the positive aspects of his theology that would come to define his life's work. Through that rupture and re-orientation, he discovered that human beings cannot tame God, cannot co-opt God for their causes, and cannot confuse the kingdom of Christ with the very fallen kingdoms of this world.

Barth learned and taught others that God speaks in complete freedom and is never bound to any sort of human ideology. Barth saw clearly that God judges—and saves—every nation. He knew that God is God, and we are not. He knew that God’s ways and God’s thoughts are higher, greater, more gracious, and more loving than ours ever could be, and he devoted the rest of his life and work to making this crucial point.

OK, end of story.

I think that today’s passage from Isaiah 55 teaches us that as Christians, we *can never say too much about the grace and mercy of God*. If we face a choice between exercising judgment and extending grace, the most Godly and Christ-like thing we can do is to stay on the side of grace.

This is God’s character in the first testament. This is God’s character that we see in the second testament – especially in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

So hear again what God is saying to us in Isaiah—not as rebuke, not as evasion, but as invitation: *Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.*

The God who speaks these words is not distant or aloof, not guarding mercy behind locked doors. This is the God whose ways are higher because his grace

is deeper, whose thoughts are greater because his love is wider, whose mercy refuses to be shaped by our fear, our anger, or the limits of our imaginations.

And this is the God we encounter in Jesus Christ—gentle and lowly in heart, welcoming sinners, forgiving freely, refusing to be co-opted by power, pride, or violence. Isaiah 55 reminds us that God’s higher ways are not meant to push us away, but to draw us home—not to silence us, but to invite our return. So today, and every day, God calls us to trust him as he truly is, and by the power of the Spirit, to walk in his higher ways as well—not with clenched fists, but with open hands; not with fear, but with grace. **Let’s Pray.**