

“Why Do You Do What You Do?”—Isaiah 1:16-18

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Why Do You Do What You Do?”, is Isaiah 1:16-18 → *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before My eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

The story is told about an old Lutheran Church within which the parishioners displayed a very unusual practice during worship. Following the receiving of the Lord’s Supper the communicants would leave the altar rail and when approaching the side aisle leading to their seat they would genuflect toward the wall of the building. Many times visitors wondered why people would kneel in front of a blank wall during worship. When asked, the parishioners didn’t know why they did such a thing. It was simply what they had learned to do following the receiving of the Lord’s Supper.

It wasn’t until a storm passed through town and caused some water

damage on the wall that the mystery was solved. When the paint peeled away from the wall the parishioners discovered a painting of Mary, the mother of Jesus, on the wall. Apparently this Lutheran church was at one time a Roman Catholic Church which became Lutheran. However, the practice of venerating the Virgin Mary continued with tradition even though her image was not visible. Everyone continued going through the motions without knowing why they were doing what they did and ended up doing what is considered idolatry, the worship of Mary.

So . . . why do you do what you do? This question requires a person to explain or justify his actions. Newlyweds may pose this question to each other because each seems to fold the towels differently or puts the toilet paper roll on the dispenser backwards. Supervisors may ask this question of their employees. In fact, people are constantly asking this question about others in critical, even self-righteous judgments everyday. It is a question which seeks to understand the reason for your actions, forcing you to justify them.

Our text records the prophet Isaiah confronting God's people about their actions outside of their worship context which affected their worshiping Him. While the LORD Himself actually required His people to offer sacrifices to Him and observe special festivals and worship rituals, now He tells them that He has *had enough of burnt offerings*, and does *not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats*. For some

reason they have become *vain offerings* and *an abomination* to Him, so much so that He *cannot endure* their *iniquity and solemn assembly* (cf. Isaiah 1:11-14). What happened?

Through the prophet Isaiah the LORD told His people to *wash* themselves; *make* themselves *clean*; *remove the evil* of their *deeds from before His eyes*; *cease to do evil, learn to do good*; *seek justice, correct oppression*; *bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause*. (verses 16-17) Their disobedience to Yahweh in the daily vocations of their lives in the world made their worship nothing but vain motions.

At the time of Isaiah's prophesying Judah and Israel were at their peak of power, prosperity, and territorial expansion, second only to the reigns of Kings David and Solomon. In the midst of such affluence and comfortable lifestyle God's people began to live hypocritical lives. Having no regard for His grace and forgiveness, they lived in blatant disobedience to His Word but still went through their religious rituals, liturgies and traditions. As long as they went through the motions of worship requirements they were "good with God" no matter how they lived their daily lives, in disobedience to Him as they dealt with their neighbors. They simply went through the required motions of ritual without a desire to truly obey the LORD in their relationships with others. They thought they were in a proper relationship with the LORD because they performed stuff in worship He commanded.

However, when a person who **thinks** he is in a proper relationship with the LORD is confronted about his sin he will usually do one of two things:

- ① He will not accept responsibility for his sin and try to explain that he does what he does because of someone else's bad behavior or sin. For example, when God confronted Adam & Eve about their sin they blamed God, each other and the devil. According to Ezekiel 18:2 God's people blamed their parents for their bad behavior by the use of a proverb: *The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.* In other words, "If our parents wouldn't have been so bad we wouldn't have turned out so bad." Sound familiar? It should. The "blame game" is the most basic form of self-justification as sinners try to explain why they do what they do when confronted about their sin. It's kind of like claiming your "rights" as a "spiritual victim."
- ② The other thing a person who **thinks** he's in a proper relationship with the LORD will do when confronted about his sin is appeal to his religious observance of rituals required by the LORD to "justify" why he does what he does. Thus, clinging to those outward forms will define his relationship with God and he will continue to believe the delusion that he is "right" with God simply because he goes through some outward motions of worship. Romans 2:15 says that when the

conscience . . . bears witness to your sins, your conflicting thoughts will accuse or even excuse them away.

In contrast, those **in a proper relationship with the LORD** will recognize their sin when confronted with it, repent and appeal to God **only on the basis of His mercy** for forgiveness and renewal, a renewal which strives to live in conformity with His Word in every area of their lives. You *wash yourselves* and *make yourselves clean* by coming to the LORD in humble repentance, confessing your sin and it's guilt upon you. Forgiven, you go into the daily tasks and vocations of life making efforts to amend your sinful ways by removing *the evil of your deeds from before God's eyes*, ceasing *to do evil* and learning *to do good*. Worship is designed to move you into service toward others with compassion, justice and the love of Christ for them because you have been divinely serviced God's forgiveness, grace and love in that worship.

Thus Yahweh's call in verse 18 of our text: *Come now, let us reason together . . . though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.* **The LORD desires hearts that worship Him, doing what they do in worship and their daily living, motivated by His gracious forgiveness alone.**

When doing what you are doing in worship it is important that your

focus is on the LORD and His dispensing of the forgiveness of sins through His means of grace. In fact, the answer to the question “Why do you do what you do?” is, “Because Jesus did what He did and continues to do.” It is because of Jesus’ perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of your sins that you can *reason together* with God in humble repentance, confident that He will forgive your sins. It is because Jesus did what He did, living in perfect obedience to God’s commands for you, which moves you to behave differently toward your neighbor. Titus 2:11-12 says: *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.* It is because Jesus did what He did in sending you the Holy Spirit that you can *worship Him in spirit and truth* (cf. John 4:24)—the truth about your sin, the truth of God’s love and forgiveness of your sins in Christ and the truth you have the privilege of displaying toward your neighbor. You do what you do because Jesus does what He does with His grace, love and forgiveness dispensed in our divine service, empowering you by the Holy Spirit in the service of Christ to others. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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