

**Isaiah 29:13-23 Dec 3**

**<sup>13</sup> Therefore the LORD said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,**

**<sup>14</sup> Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work Among this people, A marvelous work and a wonder; For the wisdom of their wise *men* shall perish, And the understanding of their prudent *men* shall be hidden." <sup>15</sup> Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the LORD, And their works are in the dark; They say, "Who sees us?" and, "Who knows us?" <sup>16</sup> Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, "He did not make me"? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"? <sup>17</sup> *Is* it not yet a very little while Till Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, And the fruitful field be esteemed as a forest? <sup>18</sup> In that day the deaf shall hear the words of the book, And the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness.**

**<sup>19</sup> The humble also shall increase *their* joy in the LORD, And the poor among men shall rejoice In the Holy One of Israel. <sup>20</sup> For the terrible one is brought to nothing, The scornful one is consumed, And all who watch for iniquity are cut off-- <sup>21</sup> Who make a man an offender by a word, And lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate, And turn aside the just by empty words. <sup>22</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: "Jacob shall not now be ashamed, Nor shall his face now grow pale; <sup>23</sup> But when he sees his children, The work of My hands, in his midst, They will hallow My name, And hallow the Holy One of Jacob, And fear the God of Israel. <sup>24</sup> These also who erred in spirit will come to understanding, And those who complained will learn doctrine."**

**<sup>13</sup> Therefore the LORD said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,**  
Jesus quoted this passage. Let's take a look at that.

**Matthew 15:1-9**

**<sup>1</sup> Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." <sup>3</sup> He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? <sup>4</sup> For God commanded, saying, '*Honor your father and your mother*'; and, '*He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.*' <sup>5</sup> But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me *is a gift to God*"-- <sup>6</sup> then he need not honor his father or**

mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. <sup>7</sup> Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: <sup>8</sup> *'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. <sup>9</sup> And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'* "

Jesus gives us an example of what Isaiah is talking about.

What Jesus displays is the self deception of legalism. True Christianity is about the true state of the heart. What is the greatest command?

### **Mark 12:30**

<sup>30</sup> ***And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.***

The core of true Christianity is **loving God with all your heart**. It is really quite simple. Now while this is a **command**, it is also an **ideal**. Do you love God with all your heart all the time? Do you know anyone who does, without exception, love God with every single thing they are? No. We fail miserably and often at that.

But we know that this is where **we are to begin**. This is what **we are about**. This is **the core** of how the Christian should live. Christianity is a heart issue from beginning to end. It involves a **change of behavior** but that change **only counts** if it comes from a changed heart. That's why most of the epistles explain salvation before they command the readers to do anything. **All of our problems are heart problems**. We mourn the state of our hearts. God deserves complete heart allegiance and loyalty and priority. We know He deserves better of us. And we long to give Him what He deserves. And the true Christian pursues that goal day after day. We eat it up. We want it. And we want to be better at it.

But false religion lives by a completely different set of hopes. It sets up a bunch of rules that feed a religious institution and the bigshots in the middle rake up the dividends. Jesus gives the example of taking money that should go to parents.

The leaders make up a different rule that diverts that money, ultimately, to them. So what were these religious leaders **talking about** all day long? They are talking about God's word. They are discussing theology. Maybe they are talking about Calvinism vs Armenianism. Maybe they are getting in on the big theological debates. But what do **they do**? They do **what they want to do**, no matter what God has said. Their lips speak of God. They even like **doing things for God**. But God is not at the core of their lives. Flesh is. They like contributing to God. But they will not submit their lives to the rule of Christ, especially in the things they want most. Their hearts are as full of flesh as they have ever been. And they even take that awful scary step of changing what **God says** in order to clean up for the flesh. They use traditions to replace truth. And this is not accidental. There is always a heart motive. There is something always in it for flesh.

Now look at this statement- **And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,**

Mr. Ortland brought out some truth in this text that is worth mentioning. *But their fear of him—even this interior dimension of worship—was only a doctrine taught by human instruction. It was just an idea, a concept in their minds, a catechetical answer, not a Spirit-imparted awareness transforming their hearts. Beneath the beautiful observance, they were using the worship of God as a mechanism for avoiding God, for controlling God, for setting limits on God. They were like Flannery O'Connor's character Haze Motes: "There was already a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin." God-evasion can look good. You can deceive even yourself. In his teaching on repentance, Calvin says that one way to get real with God is "to flee splendor and any sort of trappings." So which do you really prize—tradition or God? You cannot serve two masters. You must choose between authentic worship and pious blasphemy. "Without love in the heart, the seeming gift of worship is but mockery of the Most High."*

He went on a little later saying this:

*We Presbyterians (**Baptists in our case**), for example, need the power of godliness in our hearts because the sin of the ~~Presbyterian~~ church is to settle for the doctrine of the power of God rather than pressing on by faith into the experience of the power of God.*

*If you have a troubled child, for example, what will be most helpful to your child? Wouldn't it help your child for him or her to see your heart enthralled by a sense of the glory of Jesus? Or would that damage your child somehow? Your child might just think, If God can change Dad and Mom, maybe he can help me too. End quote.*

*Again from Mr Ortland- **Will our worship be consumed with God, or will it be consumed by God? Worship without reality means nothing to him.***

*Preaching the Word - Preaching the Word – Isaiah: God Saves Sinners.*

Notice too the difference in what the **lips say** and what the **heart does**. Christians are taught by the Bible not to accept words by themselves. Words are necessary, and they are helpful when we are talking to sincere people who are doing their best to tell the truth. But they can just be vehicles of lies to those whose hearts are untrue. So scripture teaches us to be a little skeptical. It is ok if you don't believe everything that you hear. In fact it is very healthy to be skeptical. Give everything time to see if the fruit of a person's life matches what they say. God doesn't buy into everything that people say. And we don't have to either. So Jesus has given us a good example of what Isaiah was talking about in our text. And what He showed us was **religion devoid of love**. It is a religion of **doing**

instead of **being**. It is a system that says it is **for God**, but it is really designed **by man for man**. And the core of the problem is where it says, "**But have removed their hearts far from Me**".

Where are our hearts this morning? What is it we really live for? One of the telltale signs of what we love most is an immediate and dramatic response when we don't get it. What do we get bent out of shape about the most? What do we hope for the most? Those are pretty good clues as to where our hearts really are. It would be good for every one of us to cry out to God with the question, Lord, what do I love most? What do I love more than you? And watch for Him to reveal to you what that competing love is in your day to day reactions to the circumstances He provides. We cannot be guilty of removing our hearts far from God. That would be disastrous.

**<sup>14</sup> Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work Among this people, A marvelous work and a wonder; For the wisdom of their wise *men* shall perish, And the understanding of their prudent *men* shall be hidden."**

Now, what is this therefore there for?

We learned two weeks ago that no one wanted God's Word. The **literate** wouldn't take the risk or energy to break the seal and the **illiterate** showed that the scroll wasn't important enough for them to do anything about pursuing the information in it.

Verse 13 restates that condition by talking about the hearts of these false followers.

So we get **another** therefore. Look at this reasoning of God. When we really understand it and believe it, we understand how God could bring a motley crew like us into His kingdom.

My people have pulled their hearts far from me. They don't care any more about what I say. It means nothing to them.

**Therefore** I will do a marvelous work among this people. You would think that the next thing out of God's mouth will be judgment, but it isn't.

We saw this attitude of God in chapter 3 of the first book of the Bible. And it goes to the very end of Revelation. Man hides, God pursues. Sin destroys. God restores. If you want a book that **restores your faith in humanity**, do not read the Bible. The Bible is a book that **restores your faith in God and God alone**. It is a book about human failure and God's success. If we tell the truth about our lives we would all tell the same story. Human failure, God's success. If there is anything good about us, it has Christ's fingerprints all over it.

Now God is going to do this work "again" our text says. Well maybe He is referring to the progression of this work beginning with Abraham. God did a work

in Abraham's life by giving Abraham faith in God. He believed God to the point he headed out into no-man's land. He did what would appear to everyone else as a stupid thing, simply because God said to do it. Then God did that same work over and over again in the flawed humans of Israel's history. The people God chose could never outrun God. God miraculously put a thirst in their hearts for God. That is a miracle now. That was a miracle then. It is a marvelous work.

But look where it starts.

**For the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, And the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden."**

Mr Ortland again says- *Human defiance is the madness out of which his grace is creating something new. These are the raw materials he is using to build his kingdom. Its appearing is imminent.*

Haven't we found in our own experiences that we often **won't stop taking the wrong path until we utterly tire of its frustration?** Haven't we all come to the point of desperation where we say, my way is not working. I must change. But I am afraid. I am afraid I cannot change. I have failed so many times. How can I possibly succeed? That is the frustration of human potential. Our wisdom, the way we think we are being smart, **has to fail** for God to do something new in our lives. Something has got to go. And it will be **our plans** that are contrary to **God's plans**, our **thinking** that is contrary to **God's thinking**.

In this case it was the leadership that was taking the people down the wrong path. God was going to prove that they were liars. The thing that seemed like wisdom is going to be proven to be absolute foolishness. Their ideas will be buried under an avalanche of reality that is exactly opposite of what they predicted it to be.

As I was thinking of a good example of bad leadership being proven to be false and futile, all I had to do is think of recent headlines in the "so-called" news. When we look at that we have to think we are about the dumbest people ever born into existence. I know that probably isn't true, but we are so slow to get the point. Our creator gave us very clear rules about how we are to use our bodies. And He granted us marriage between a man and a woman as the wonderful blessing that it is. But no. The so called progressive wisdom of our age has thrown off all constraint. They proclaim that we should be able to do whatever we want with our bodies with one small meaningless caveat that no one should be hurt in the process. We ignore the fact that the whole process, according to God, is hurtful.

We have young women trying to figure out how to play their hands, ignorant of the repercussions, and not realizing that the whole deck is stacked against them from the start. And we have men doing what they always will when they depart from God and think they can get away with their behavior. And then our society's

prophets of morality look aghast at what happens when the restraint is cast off. They condemn the ones who have simply followed their advice. The hypocrisy in this lunacy is so obvious. We watch as the **the wisdom of their wise men** perishes every day. But our blind culture does not have the wisdom to see it. We refuse to add it up and say, well **this isn't working so well. Maybe we should try something else.** No, instead they say we simply need to try harder. We keep trying the same behavior and hoping for a different result. Our prophets of humanism and secularism haven't done us any favors.

God knows that **for the miracle needed in our lives, for the change needed in our lives,** we have to give up on the wrong alternatives. It needs proven to us that these false paths do not work and will never work. We need to see that the promoters of these instructions are liars, even when it is our own heart that is doing the bad teaching.

Then Isaiah describes these leaders a little further.

**<sup>15</sup> Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the LORD, And their works are in the dark; They say, "Who sees us?" and, "Who knows us?"**

This is probably describing what the leadership was doing in working out an alliance with Egypt in an attempt to ward off the Assyrians. They were keeping it hid from their countrymen and presumably from God. As if God is not going to know what they are trying to pull off.

Isn't that like us? We think **if** we can deceive **others** about our sin that we are somehow getting away with it. The problem is that even if no one knows, God knows. Trying to get away with anything from God is patently stupid. Why even bother trying to hide our sin from those in the body we trust? God knows about it already. Having help in the process of dealing with it is a good thing, not a bad thing. And keeping others ignorant of our sin does nothing in hiding it from God. It really serves no useful purpose. Our flesh gravitates toward dark. The Holy Spirit gravitates toward light. We are supposed to walk in the light. The light exposes. And that is always the first step in restoration and healing.

**<sup>16</sup> Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, "He did not make me"? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?** Maybe the title for this sermon should be called **"The danger of thinking upside down."**

The word for things turned around has several alternate meanings. It also means turned upside down, perverse, as in- not the way it should be naturally. It also means to the contrary. It isn't hard to get the point.

The leaders were looking at God upside down. They had things exactly opposite of what they really are.

Suppose Carter could talk right now. And suppose this is what he was saying. Hey mom. I have done a pretty fine job of making you into a good mom, haven't I? Or Hey dad, I am pretty good at getting you to go to work every day aren't I. Man it is good I am here or you would be really messed up. If you want any advice guys, I am available.

We would laugh and say, that is stupid. That is just dumb. That is backwards. And that is the point.

We are surrounded by a world that is critical of God. They say if God is good, then why... bla bla bla. They seek to prove in their infinite wisdom that God is **not** good. Or that God does not exist. Or what God should be like **if He does exist**. Or what God **must be like**, no matter what He has revealed about Himself. Yes, we say, God, you are lucky to have us for we have made you what you are today. That is our upside down world.

The potter and the clay illustration is used several times in scripture, each time to prove a different aspect of God's sovereignty.

In Isaiah the point is being made that it is the Potter who deserves the credit for all that is done, not the clay. It is the potter who is in control. Not the clay. The Potter is mentioned again in chapter 64.

#### **Isaiah 64:8**

**<sup>8</sup> But now, O LORD, You *are* our Father; We *are* the clay, and You our potter; And all we *are* the work of Your hand.**

Here we see again the proper perspective of the cause and effect. We are not the causer. We are the effect.

#### **Jeremiah 18:1-6**

**<sup>1</sup> The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying: <sup>2</sup> "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words."**

**<sup>3</sup> Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. <sup>4</sup> And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. <sup>5</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: <sup>6</sup> "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the LORD. "Look, as the clay *is* in the potter's hand, so *are* you in My hand, O house of Israel!**

This time the potter is about to destroy the people for their sin. The point is that God has the **right to do this** and **the power to do it**. And He **is going to do it**. And it is as easy as a potter smashing a creation that he did not like.

#### **Romans 9:19-21**

**<sup>19</sup> You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" <sup>20</sup> But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed *it*, "Why have you made me like this?"**

**<sup>21</sup> Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?**

Here is the age old mystery of how God can be sovereign, **the causer**, and man can be held responsible for **the effect** God has. And the partial answer is that God has every right to do whatever He wants. In fact, one way to understand Sovereignty is that God can do whatever He wants whenever He wants. So the question is "why" and the answer is, because I had the power to do what I want. There is **more to it** than just this. But this is a **part** of the mystery.

The potter has the total power over the clay. That is the point. If the clay turns into a beautiful pot, the clay cannot say, I did this. He must say God did this. All analogies fall apart at points. Clay does not expend effort. We do, and must, expend effort. But scripture is clear. Anything that is good in our lives God gets the credit for.

Now this is so simple, surely all of us believers get this and live according to it? Well, when is the last time you prayed telling God **what He had to do**? When have we said- God I cannot do this, which interpreted means, **God you must change your plan. You must change my circumstances**. I refuse to exercise my faith in your word that says that You are sufficient to get me through this.

Is that not upside down thinking? Oh we excuse it because of our strong feelings and our infinite wisdom about our limitations as a human. But aren't we guilty of telling the Potter how to be a potter.

How else do we tell the potter how to be a potter? How about when we are in temptations? When we give in to a temptation, are we not saying, I cannot do this? Are we not telling the potter backhandedly what he can and cannot test us with? Yes, our hearts are the trickiest people we know.

I often kid my wife that the best exercise for her neck is to do this:

Nod head up and down.

While **my** leadership does not always deserve that, **God's does**. Smart clay says yes to the master's hands. And that is the beauty in the Christian life. We aren't doomed to be inert clay. We have a part to play. We can be obedient clay. We can **lean into** what the Master is doing in our lives. We can be involved.

Is there a place in your life this morning where you are saying "no". Why? Is it not a mistrust of the Potter's skill and wisdom? Where are you resisting the Potter's shaping? Don't you think that today might be a good day to start saying YES?

**<sup>16</sup> Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, "He did not make me"? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?**

Upside down thinking attempts to rob God of the credit for what He has done and to evaluate God's knowledge as being inferior to ours. And every one of us here

has been guilty of upside down thinking. We have all been like sheep going our own way expressing great confidence in our ability to make ourselves happy. We have all nodded at God's direction while choosing a path that says we have zero confidence that God knows what He is doing. We have all been clay telling the Potter He is clueless about real living. And what has it gotten us? Heartache, confusion, depression, guilt, anxiety, harsh consequences, wasted time, dread. Oh yes, isn't **this lump of clay clever**? God compares us to sheep along with clay. The difference is, clay isn't expected to have any sense. Sheep should but don't. Have you ever considered that our Potter, our Shepherd, our Lord has given us a chore that He very clearly told us that we should be about it until He returns. We should be about evangelism and discipleship. He could not have been clearer about that. Go into all the world making disciples. And the command was to all of us. Every single one of us who believes in Christ have been given this command.

Now look at your life and have this honest conversation with yourself. What priority does evangelism and discipleship have in your life? When is the last time you thought about how you could intentionally turn your contacts with non believers into evangelistic opportunities? When is the last time you considered taking a new believer under your wing, involving them intentionally into your life so you can help them grow to obey Christ like you obey Christ?

What will we say to that? Will we say that our potter has no understanding? Surely He does not expect that from me?

Carla and I watched a film I hope all of us as a church will watch soon. It is called the Insanity of God and it is about the real lives of believers who are facing persecution. The guy who narrates much of the story is a Baptist, just like us. He said the results of a recent survey said that 9 out of 10 Baptists will never share their faith with anyone in their lifetime. One of the most central commands in scriptures, right up there with love God and love people. And 9 out of 10 professing Christians never do it. I am committed to making this more of a priority in my life. And I am committed to seeing to it that all of us are equipped with whatever is needed to carry out this task in the world God has placed us in. We cannot tell our Potter, you really don't know what you are asking. You really don't know my world. You really don't know me. No. Our potter knows exactly what He is doing. But some of his clay can be pretty unruly.

We must free ourselves of upside down thinking.

We will take up with the rest of the text next week.