

Isaiah 56-57 Distinguishing Marks of the People of God

According to most commentators, there are three main sections in the Book of Isaiah. In the first section (cps. 1-37), the major theme seems to be about God who rules Israel and the world as a sovereign KING. This is highlighted in cp. 6 as Isaiah sees this King, “high and lifted” up on the throne of the universe. In the second section (cps. 38-55), we see a lot of history as well as predictive prophecy of a coming Babylonian captivity, and even a return from this captivity. And the dominant theme, I believe, is the work of God’s Servant for both Israel, and the world. Today, we come to a third section (cps. 56-66). These chapters look forward to a coming day when God will rule over his people through an anointed conqueror. Look at 59:15b-17: **“The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.”** In these last chapters Isaiah looks forward to a universal city, a New Jerusalem where the righteousness of God will rule forever. Cp. 66:12 says, **“For thus says the Lord: Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream . . .”** Isaiah speaks to a particular people at that time. However, He speaks to all people in all of history with the SAME principles of truth and application. My goal as a preacher is to see those truths and proclaim them to us as we try in our day to apply these truths in light of the person and work of God’s Servant, Jesus Christ. We are a waiting people! We wait for ultimate salvation. We wait for complete and final justice in this world. And as we wait, we are set apart from the world as a particular kind of people. With this in mind, I want us to see in cps. 56-57 three distinguishing marks of God’s people.

1. The People of God are distinguished by righteousness. As we wait, we are distinguished by righteousness. Let me read vv. 1-8: **“Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil. Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” For thus says the LORD: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house**

and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. “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— 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.” The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.”

Here we see foreigners and Jews alike with the same standard. He says, **“keep justice”** (v. 1), **“do righteousness”** (v. 1) and **“hold fast my covenant”** (v. 4). For Israel, we see **“burnt offerings”** and **“sacrifices”** in the Temple (v. 7). In that context, the people of God were exhorted to be “righteous” even when their leaders were not. Look at vv. 9-12: **“All you beasts of the field, come to devour— all you beasts in the forest. His watchmen are blind; they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs; they cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. But they are shepherds who have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all. “Come,” they say, “let me get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow will be like this day, great beyond measure.”** God was saying: “Set yourselves apart. Follow my commands. In doing this, you will be DIFFERENT from the world.

The primary example in this text (and many others) is keeping the Sabbath (v. 2, 4). Keeping the Sabbath was very important for Israel. It was one of the outward signs of God’s people that set them apart. Saturday was their day. They did no work. As far as I can tell, they did not play. They prepared meals beforehand. They didn’t walk very far on that day. Unlike the world, they COMPLETELY reordered their lives around the worship of the Lord God. When the world looked at them, they knew they were different, even in periods of exile. And apparently, Isaiah felt it necessary to address a problem. Let me give a short parenthesis.

(So, what do we make of keeping the Sabbath today? Let me spend just a moment on this topic, which I think is necessary. There is great disagreement in the Christian world, even among those who believe the authority of the Word, concerning the “Sabbath” or the “Christian Sabbath.” Personally, I believe it is wise and necessary to rest one day in seven (though Sunday is not my day of rest). However, I am not a Sabbatarian as I believe Jesus completely fulfilled the Sabbath and all the Law of Moses. It is interesting that the NT does not repeat the 4th commandment. And at the Jerusalem Council the Apostles tell the Gentiles to “**abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols . . . and from sexual immorality**” (Acts 15:28-29). I know the other arguments. However, I believe the way we show ourselves to the world is in these things: that we do not forsake the gathering together of God’s people (Heb. 10:25); that we love one another in a way that is markedly different from the world; that we order ourselves in local churches in a way that distinguishes us from the world; that we live in a way that is different from the world; that we make disciples in the world, teaching them to obey the commands of Christ (who in my opinion does not tell us to keep the Sabbath as they did under the law of Moses). However, what we do to neglect the gathering together of God’s people in our culture can be very sinful. I know there may be some here that disagree (let’s talk later). I don’t think it is a gospel issue. But I do believe this topic requires more thought and discussion.)

For our purposes, keeping the Sabbath in Is. 56 was the example, not the principle truth. The underlying principle is righteous living in an unrighteous world. Jesus says, “**You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”** (Matt. 5:13-16).

Let me end this truth with some comments of application.

Righteousness brings unity. When we live together and live in a certain way we are unified and the world sees this unity. (So, what do we do about those in our midst who do not walk in righteousness? I believe the local church is key in the NT. We are given the keys of the kingdom to make certain judgments in our own body.)

Righteous living is habitual. We see “habitual action” in the words “seek” and “choose” of v. 4. And sometimes, our “choices” are costly.

The underlying fruit of righteousness is love for God. V. 6 shows that habitual life choices come from a heart of love to the Lord. This means we do not make right decisions ultimately simply because they are right (though this is true); we make choices because we love the Lord who gives us commands (See Ps. 119).

Righteous living results in blessedness (v. 2).

2. The People of God are distinguished by humility. In chapter 57, we see how righteousness affects the heart. As we wait for the coming of our Lord, we pursue righteousness and those who do this are possessed with humility. We are humble because we know that our righteousness is not our own. We cannot produce enough of it to square with the glory of God. The pictures of cp. 57 are striking. Isaiah compares the brood of a prostitute with the household of God. And they could not be further apart! Look at vv. 3-9: **“But you, draw near, sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and the loose woman. Whom are you mocking? Against whom do you open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue? Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit, you who burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree, who slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks? Among the smooth stones of the valley is your portion; they, they, are your lot; to them you have poured out a drink offering, you have brought a grain offering. Shall I relent for these things? On a high and lofty mountain you have set your bed, and there you went up to offer sacrifice. Behind the door and the doorpost you have set up your memorial; for, deserting me, you have uncovered your bed, you have gone up to it, you have made it wide; and you have made a covenant for yourself with them, you have loved their bed, you have looked on nakedness. You journeyed to the king with oil and multiplied your perfumes; you sent your envoys far off, and sent down even to Sheol.”** Here we see idolatry and adultery as the ways of the people are likened to that of a prostitute.

Then, in v. 15 we see the people of God’s “dwelling.” **“For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”**

This is one of the most beautiful truths in all of Scripture. God inhabits eternity. His name is Holy. And he dwells in the high and holy place. This is his transcendence we talked about a few weeks back. Yet, in his immanence, He ALSO dwells with the one who is “lowly in spirit,” and with a “contrite heart.” This is humility. God opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). Out of all the places the world thinks God should show himself, He shows himself in humility. Last week with Elijah, we saw that God took him up on a mountain as He saw a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire. Yet, God was in none of them. Instead, he came in a low whisper to the humble heart of Elijah.

I love the ways of our God as he shows himself in humility. Parents, how many times have some of your greatest times of learning come through your children, especially as something they do reminds you again of some principle or truth from God’s word. **“Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise”** (Matt. 21:16). I think of many who have adopted children with special needs, knowing how difficult life will be. Yet, God is so gracious in those families. I consider how our world wants to abort children with medical problems in the womb. But, to me, the most beautiful children may be those with down syndrome. I think of Jesus’ prayer in Matt. 11:25-26: **“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”** Brothers and sisters, it so reveals the character and greatness of God that those who will enter the kingdom must become like children; humble, knowing they can do nothing apart from Him. And in our weakness, He is strong!

In this passage we also see another truth of the grace of God in the life of proud sinners. I believe, from one perspective, humility is a gift. And I thank God that, by His Spirit, He granted me a heart of humility. Look at vv. 16-19: **“For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before me, and the breath of life that I made. Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart. I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,”** says the LORD, **“and I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, creating the fruit of the lips.”** Let’s move on.

3. The People of God are distinguished by peace. Look at 57:1-2: **“The righteous man perishes, and no one lays it to heart; devout men are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous man is taken away from calamity; he enters into peace; they rest in their beds who walk in their uprightness.”** Also notice vv. 19-21: **“Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,”** says the LORD, **“and I will heal him. But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace,”** says my God, **“for the wicked.”** In this chapter Isaiah is comparing the righteous with the unrighteous. And one difference is a heart of peace. This isn’t so much speaking about a peace maker, but instead a disposition of the heart, something that goes along with righteousness. V. 2 says that the people of God (those with faith), **“rest in their beds.”** But, ***“the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet . . . There is no peace . . . for the wicked!”***

Do you remember the story when Jesus was in the boat with his disciples and a great storm came upon the sea, so great that some professional sailors knew they were going to perish? Where was Jesus? He was asleep. And He woke up, rebuked their little faith, and said, “peace be still.” (Mark 4:35-41). Brothers and sisters, ultimate peace is coming. And Isaiah has shown us and will show again that true peace will come through God’s Servant, also God’s anointed conqueror. This is the Lord Jesus, who says, **“Come to me all of you who labor and are heavy with burdens . . . I will give you rest”** (Matt. 11:28).

Let me ask, *“How does coming to Jesus bring you peace?”* This is a good time for a simple reminder. By nature, we are “children of wrath,” not children of peace (Eph. 2). This is evident in the world. In order for peace to come, our sins, God’s wrath, must be taken away. This happens in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He lived a perfect life as the son of man, yet still the Son of God. And he laid down his life as a sacrifice in the place of sinners. And God punished him. Wrath poured out upon him. These two chapters in Isaiah are about righteousness and the righteousness of God being revealed. Well, upon the cross the righteousness of God is revealed. On the cross, Jesus broke down the wall of sin and death. And he rose again and ascended to heaven upon the throne of the universe. And those who trust in him are given PEACE, peace by the Holy Spirit. In John 14:27 Jesus says, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”** This is the gospel of peace!

Today, we wait for the consummation, the coming of the Lord Jesus. And in the meantime, we are distinguished by righteousness, by humility, and peace! And these distinguishing marks are ours until that day comes! Therefore, if you are not a Christian, look unto Christ. If you are, also, look unto Christ, as the most beautiful savior and Lord.