

“Free Lunch”

Isaiah 55

There’s no free lunch. That’s obvious, isn’t it? Nothing really worth having comes easily: it takes blood, toil, tears and sweat. So, maybe that’s why the offer of something free is irresistible to so many people. Think, for example, of the phenomenal sums the gambling boats are raking in. Everyone knows there’s no free lunch. Everyone knows the games are stacked in favor of the house. And yet the gamblers can’t help wishing, hoping that perhaps they will be the exception to the rule, that they will be the winners.

So, considering such a desire for that which is free, I have to wonder why we have any empty seats this morning: after all, we don’t charge admission to come in here. But an even greater mystery is the fact that anyone would want to remain outside God’s kingdom. For listen again to God’s invitation: “Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

In short, God offers us a truly free lunch. He insists that we can come to Him without paying. But this is not the illusory sort of freebie offered by the gambling boats. After all, the vast majority of the people who seek riches there end up losing whatever they have in their pockets. And some lose much more: their jobs or their families, or even their health.

And you know, the people in Isaiah’s time weren’t much different. That’s why he says, “Why do you spend money for *what is* not bread, And your wages for *what does* not satisfy?” People have been chasing rainbows for a long time – and have continued to come up empty.

But this isn’t just a problem for gamblers, is it? Think of the alcoholic or drug addict whose appetite for real food is suppressed. All he wants is that which is killing him – wholesome food has no appeal. Or think of the person who just can’t let go of an old grudge. All he wants is to nurture his resentment, even as it is embittering and consuming him.

No, the sad truth is that many continue to cling to the blade of the sword of sin, embracing it and pulling it into themselves even while its sharp edges draw blood. The sinner stands, as it were, in front of the slot machine of life, pouring his money, his time, his efforts, his affection into nothingness. Sin promises the world but delivers only death.

In stark contrast, God offers us what we really need: wine and milk, water for the thirsty, and abundance for the soul. And what God offers is real, and really available to us. For God says, “Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.” Yes, God really may be found. God really is near. God promises a real free, wholesome lunch, a feast of true, everlasting fellowship with the One True God.

So why don’t more people take Him up on His offer? Why do so many continue instead to live in sin and rebellion?

Perhaps the answer is contained in the invitation: those who are invited are those who thirst, those without money. In other words, God calls those who know they are needy to come to Him. After all, hungry people know they need something to eat, and poor people know they need money. Just so, before people can accept God’s offer of salvation, they must know that they are sinners in need of a Savior.

That’s why God addresses His offer the way He does: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD.” For you see, God’s offer is not for those who think they are okay. It’s for those who know they are wicked, for those who know they are unrighteous.

But the sad truth is that everyone doesn’t understand their need. And that’s because, just as sin presents a false view of its rewards, offering death while promising life, sin also gives us a false view of human nature. For sin tells us, “You aren’t so bad. Look at all those people doing horrible things over there. They’re much worse. And

anyway, you may make a mistake every now and then, but you certainly shouldn't consider yourself wicked or unrighteous."

No, it's no wonder that God says in verse 8 that the root of our sin problem is in our perceptions: "For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD." You see, it's not enough for us to compare ourselves to others, or even to compare our actions with our own intentions. No, we must measure ourselves according to God's thoughts and God's ways as they are recorded for us in the Scriptures. And according to God's standard of holiness, according to God's law of love, we are all wicked. By considering ourselves to be more important than others, or even more important than God, we are all unrighteous.

But even if we can see through sin's deception, even if we realize that, in cutting us off from God sin offers us only death, even if we understand our own wickedness, there's still another problem, another reason why more people don't accept God's free offer of grace and forgiveness. For in order for the wicked to turn toward God, he must turn away from his own way, his own agenda, his own desires, and even his own thoughts. He must turn away from all these things, and turn to God, embracing God's way, God's agenda, God's desires, and even God's thoughts. And such a turning away from sin and self and turning to God is what the Scripture calls repentance.

So why don't more people repent? Because it's not easy. For the fact is that even those who follow Jesus have areas in our lives in which we insist on our own way. Even those who trust in Christ continue to be tempted by the remnants of sin in our lives to take matters back into our own hands, to follow our own way and think our own thoughts. We keep trying to climb back upon the throne of our lives and worship ourselves as gods.

And so if that's true for Christians, how much more difficult repentance is for those who don't trust Christ at all! After all, all they know is sin and its results. All they have ever lived for, all they have ever trusted is themselves. Why should they admit they are wrong about everything they believe in? Why should they admit that they are wrong about everything they are? Why should they repent and trust God?

Why? For the same reasons that Christians should. We should all place our trust in God because of what His Word tells us about Him. Notice in verses 10 and 11 that Isaiah compares God's Word to the rain. Whenever rain falls, it nourishes the ground, which in turn provides bread for man. Just so, whenever God's word leaves His mouth, it will accomplish the purpose for which He sent it.

And notice that Isaiah uses the word return in verse 11, just as in verse 7. The very reason that the wicked can return or repent and trust God is that God's Word will not return or repent. God's Word will never change: once spoken, it cannot be altered.

So what assurance does God's inerrant, infallible Word offer us? What word of absolute truth would God have us hear? Look at verse 3: "Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, *even* the sure mercies of David. Behold, I have given him *for* a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people."

What does David have to do with the promises of God? The covenant that God made with David was a promise of eternal kingship. God promised that there would never fail a ruler from David's line to rule over God's people. And so, if we stop trusting in ourselves, Who will be our leader and commander? Who is the one in Whom we can place our trust to protect us?

Jesus. For He is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of David, the One Who fulfills God's covenant promise, the One Who rules and reigns over everyone and everything forever. But more than that, Jesus is also the Living Word of God, the One who unfailingly accomplishes the purpose of the Father by not only telling us the truth of God's grace and forgiveness, but Who lives out that very truth for all who seek Him, for all those who truly repent.

And Jesus' work is chronicled most clearly just two chapters before this one, in Isaiah 53, which we read responsively this morning. Yes, all we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way. Our ways are not God's ways and our thoughts are not God's thoughts. None of us are anything more than sinners in need of a Savior.

So how did Jesus become the Savior we all so desperately need? “The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Yes, Jesus paid the price so that we can come and have all the food we want. And when the Father has paid such a price, offering His own son’s life so that we might not die, what other assurance could we need that He will accept all those who come to Him?

And what is the promise God makes to the repentant? “Let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” God promises, based on the work accomplished by His Incarnate Word, that He will have mercy on those Who come to Him. That’s why we don’t need to fear punishment for our sins. Instead, God promises to pardon abundantly all those who are in Christ, all those for whom Christ has already paid the supreme sacrifice.

And look at all the people to whom these promises are made. Verse 5 tells us that “nations *that* knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the LORD thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee.” And that true, isn’t it? In Christ, people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation have been and will continue to be drawn into the Kingdom of God. Yes, the good news is that God’s promises of forgiveness and pardon are not just for the physical descendants of Abraham, but for all of Abraham’s spiritual descendants, for all those who trust in Christ for their salvation.

And what is the reward that awaits the repentant sinner who comes to Christ? Having confessed his thirst and his hunger, having admitted his need for God and his inability to save himself, he comes, abandoning his own way to follow God’s way. But once he has received God’s free grace, God’s mercy and pardon, how will his life be changed?

What does Isaiah promise us? “For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace.” In other words, there will be a personal transformation within the life of the penitent. He will no longer be hungry and thirsty for God. Instead, God will feed him with the Bread of Life and out of him will flow streams of living water. Joy and peace will fill his soul.

Moreover, in addition to this personal transformation, there will also be a transformation of all creation. For in verse 12 God promises that “the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap *their* hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the LORD for a name, for an everlasting sign *that* shall not be cut off.”

Yes, God promises that someday the harmful thorns and the briers which came upon the earth as a result of Adam’s sin will be replaced by beneficial plants: the harmony between man and nature that we saw in the Garden of Eden will thus be restored. Yes, one day, Paradise will be regained. And a transformed and renewed human race living within a transformed and renewed earth will be an eternal testimony to the goodness and grace of God, proclaiming His infinite wisdom and justice, mercy and love.

But the good news is that we don’t have to wait until Jesus comes again to get a glimpse of both transformations, of mankind and earth. The good news is that we can share in the joy and peace, in all the blessings of heaven now. Our hunger and thirst can be satisfied now. Our lives can be filled with abundance now – if only we will answer God’s call to repent, to turn away from sin and self and turn to the One Who died so that we might live.

So, why do you spend your money for that which is not bread? Why do you labor for that which doesn’t satisfy? God offers you sure and certain promises: living water, the bread of life, everlasting life. Come to Him. Trust Him and live.