

Isaiah 61:1-3, 10,11

December 3, 2023

How important is theology? Is doctrine, the teachings of the Bible something that we can agree to disagree on? In all honesty, if you were to ask different Christians, and even different pastors in different church bodies, you would likely get very different answers. Doctrine, or theology, is what we believe about Jesus- was he really true God, did he actually do miracles, was he really born of a virgin, do you need to believe in him to be saved, or can you be saved by being faithful to other religions? I've heard it said that these questions don't really matter that much, as long as we agree on the *important* stuff- that we show Christ's love to our community.

I must politely, firmly and vehemently disagree. Theology matters. Doctrine is deeply, profoundly important and if we can't agree on the big, important teachings of Scripture, how can we work together? How can we show Christ's love to our neighbors if we don't even know what Christ's love actually is? How can we even talk about Christ unless we agree what it is that he actually came to earth to do? Today, I want to explore that question in particular with you: What exactly did Jesus come to do? What exactly was his mission? Fascinatingly enough, this question was answered long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, through the prophet Isaiah, we see that **Jesus Came to Bring Good News**. And in the final two verses, we will have two important, practical applications: **The Good News Will Always Be Relevant**, and **Good News Produces Organic Growth**.

If you remember what we talked about last week, you may remember that Isaiah wrote about 740 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and his message to God's chosen nation, Israel, is that they are going to soon be dominated and destroyed by the Babylonian Empire and that their homes, farms, lives, families, and hopes are about to be destroyed as they are forced to leave their homeland and live in refugee camps in Babylon, and here we see God's rich grace and mercy that not only does he warn them about the exile before it happens, he also predicts the end of the exile before it happens as well. And Isaiah realizes this as he proclaims with joy that the Spirit of the LORD God is upon him and that he has been anointed, specially chosen to proclaim God's Word of comfort and joy to those who are poor, not necessarily in wealth, but in spirit. He has received words from God himself meant to bind up the wounds of those who are brokenhearted, who are captives and prisoners in Babylonian exile. Think about it- the exile hasn't happened yet, so Isaiah knows that his Words wouldn't be appreciated while he was alive- his Words wouldn't cause healing until long after he was dead and God's people sat defeated in those refugee camps- and still he's filled with joy to do it! He proclaims the year of the Lord's Favor and the day of wrath- that God's abundant mercy will come upon his people when he ends their captivity in Babylon and gives justice to their oppressors for their crimes.

See what God is going to give his people- Instead of mourning in exile, they will rejoice as they return home to Israel. Instead of sprinkling ashes on their heads, which was the ancient way of saying, "my life is incinerated, like these ashes, and I wish I were dead," they would put garlands of green plants and flowers on their heads because now their lives are going to be lush and fertile. Instead of letting their skin get all dry and wrinkled and gross-looking, which would happen in the middle-eastern dry, hot climate, and was again, a sign of mourning and depression, they would invigorate their skin with olive oil to show that they were hopeful and happy. Instead of looking like shabby, dry, dead plants, they would seem like oaks of righteousness- strong,

vigorous, nourished, and God would be glorified- people would look at them and say, “wow, their God must really love them.” Beautiful words- but why should you care?

Because in the New Testament, something absolutely astounding happens. In Luke 4, Jesus is about to reveal who he is, that he is God himself in the flesh here to save all humanity. How does he do it? He goes to the synagogue service, and reads from, the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61, and reads the opening lines- *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* And in the presence of all those people, Jesus looked them in the eyes and said, *“Today, this prophecy is fulfilled in your hearing.”* Do you know what this means? Isaiah was just the shadow- his words never belonged to him. These words belong to Christ, and the salvation and good news and freedom that God gave to Israel from Babylon was just a shadow of the true freedom and joy that Jesus would bring to his people.

What did Christ come to do? Well, let me tell you what he *didn’t* come to do. Jesus did *not* come to be an example for us on how we can earn God’s favor. He did *not* come to give us a new law or set of rules to follow. He did *not* come to make us happy or wealthy or prosperous. He didn’t even come to show us the love of God on the cross, as if we could also express that kind of love. How do I know? Because the Bible clearly teaches that we are all slaves to sin, that all of us are bent on doing evil, not good, that all of us are destined to die for our sins, and deep down our hearts groan because of it.. What sense would it make to visit a prisoner in chains and give them good advice on how to not go to prison? What sense would it make to show someone on death row a guidebook on how not to end up on death row? What sense would it make to go to someone who is terminally ill, destined to die any day, and to give them a birthday party? Well, then what sense would it make for Jesus to come to a world of lost, broken, sinners enslaved to Satan, doomed to die, and give them good advice, earthly prosperity, religious wisdom, or a shining example of what they will never be able to achieve? According to Isaiah, but really, Jesus himself, he came not to give prisoners advice, but freedom from their prisons of sin so they could be free from the punishment of death forever. Not simply happiness, earthly, temporary comfort, or something to numb the pain of earthly life, but the oil of joy that empowers us to endure all sadness and hardship, not simply happiness, but joy that sustains you through your tears on earth. Not another law or set of rules on how to appease your God, but he himself lived the perfect, holy life in our place, and then endured the day of wrath of the LORD that we all should have suffered, so we could receive the years, the eternity of God’s favor- so we could be not just pretty flowers, but oaks of righteousness- deeply rooted in what Christ has done, nothing can uproot you from what Christ has promised to you, a changed, saved Christian, and your very existence as a Christian brings glory to God, that he could redeem, change, save, and love sinners like you and me. That is what Jesus came to do.

Which brings me to my first application point: **The Good News will always be relevant.** A survey by PR Newswire found that 4 out of 5 Americans are unsatisfied with how they look, and about a third are considering medical treatment, surgery or otherwise, not because they are unhealthy, but because their bodies don’t look the way they think they should. And the most common reason they wanted to change their body was not health, functionality, or even to feel better. It was to boost their self esteem. How they esteemed themselves, how they valued

themselves, is based on how they look. Statistically, this is how most Americans think about themselves- we are deeply vain, yet deeply insecure. It's fascinating to see the different ways people try to make themselves "look" better. For some, it's makeup, beauty products, skin care routines, fashion, or hair styles.. For others, their beauty or attractiveness is based on others- I'll show you what I mean. When I was in high school, a friend of mine from a different school showed me a picture of his girlfriend, and I said, "Nice." He said, "what do you mean, 'nice?' You think she's just 'nice?' 'You don't think she's beautiful?" I said, "Do you want me to?" That conversation confused me for a long time, but verse ten gives invaluable insight. It wasn't simply enough for him to be attracted to his girlfriend, he needed others to be as well, because if his girlfriend was truly attractive and desirable to many people, and she desired him above all others, then that meant that he was truly attractive and desirable. Whether or not we realize it, we all do this. We use products, surgeries, clothes, and other people to make ourselves more attractive and desirable because in the garden of Eden, we lost our status of perfection before God and we all feel ugly deep down.

Please don't misunderstand- you can buy nice clothes and use makeup and exercise and take care of yourself- those are good things. But never forget what makes you beautiful. Never forget what makes you truly desirable and worthy. The righteousness and perfection of Christ that adorns you like the finest robe and fills your God's heart with joy. Because of Christ, God is ravished by you. His heart is filled by you. Women, your true beauty comes not from your looks, nor from the inside, but from God's declaration that you are flawless- that is your true garland of beauty- like a bride on her wedding day. Men, your worth comes not from your wealth or accomplishments or attractiveness, but from Christ's death and resurrection for you- that is your headdress of honor.

Which brings me to my final point- **The Gospel produces organic growth.** I hope that the people here, over the years of hearing the Gospel, have learned and experienced its life changing, life-giving power. Yet, one thing I'm in the process of learning, and something we as a congregation will have to learn as well, is that the Gospel produces organic, powerful change and growth like the trees in a forest.. Often, we think the Gospel is like a microwave, and the change it produces in people is like popcorn. If I press the right buttons and wait a few minutes, eventually I'm going to hear "pop, pop, pop" and in about thirty seconds I'll be able to eat. That's not how it works. The Gospel is much more like planting a garden or grove of trees. First of all, we can't make it grow, only God can. And it takes a while. So my final plea to you is this: Trust the good news of Jesus Christ. Use the good news. And wait. The change we desire in our friends and families and ourselves will come- just not on our time. And it will be glorious and powerful, and beautiful. Trust the good news.. Amen.