

ISAIAH 56:1, 6-8
HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL

Our reading begins with verse one, but then it skips to verse six, and by doing so it misses the emphasis of this text. So, I'll read verses two, four and six for you, and you see if you can discern what this message is focusing on.

"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."

For thus says the Lord: "To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, who choose the things that please Me and hold fast My covenant,

"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" (v's 2, 4, 6).

Did you catch the repetition? Sabbath, Sabbath, Sabbath! Not profane, Hold fast My covenant, not profane, hold fast My covenant. Son of Man, Eunuchs, foreigners, everyone.

This passage is a message from the Lord God to everyone about the Sabbath and what we're supposed to be doing on the Sabbath, what we're supposed to be doing today. So let's review the third commandment of God's covenant.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

This isn't just for us, secluded in this little building, but rather these words are meant for all people. God's mission is to bring all people to His church and to the knowledge of salvation. God's plan of redemption has a universal scope, a desire to save all people. The first purpose of any of God's blessings is so that the saving ways of God in Christ Jesus would be known by all people.

However, before we rush out to all the world let's start with us here, and what we're supposed to be doing today. The Old Testament contains a way of teaching us to remember and emphasizing certain things by repetition. I showed you a little of that already with the repetition that the Sabbath day is meant for everyone, and what we're meant to be doing on the Sabbath Day is also repeated – "make them joyful in My house of prayer", "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples". We're supposed to be praying. We praise God and sing songs of joy to God that are prayers.

Right from the start God's Holy House was meant to be a house of prayer. At the dedication of the first Temple for God "Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven, and said, "Have regard to the **prayer** of Your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the **prayer** that Your servant **prays** before You this day, that Your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which You have said, 'My name shall be there,' that You may listen to the **prayer** that Your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they **pray** toward this place. And listen in heaven Your dwelling place, and when You hear, forgive." (1 Kings 8:22, 28-30).

"Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of Your people Israel, comes from a far country for Your name's sake (for they shall hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm), when he comes and **prays** toward this house, hear in heaven Your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by Your name" (v's 41-43).

Yet, the Temple didn't remain a house of prayer for the Israelites and foreigners. God asks Jeremiah, "Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" (7:11).

And things didn't change with God's reprimand of the people through the prophet Jeremiah. Jesus repeated similar words. He said, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of **prayer**,' but you make it a den of robbers.'" – Matthew 21:13.

The intention of our text from Isaiah was to assure Gentiles that they too could offer sacrifices to the Lord. When Solomon had the temple built it had a courtyard for the Gentiles, the non-Jews, but already in Isaiah's and Jeremiah's day the Jews started taking that away from the Gentiles. The Jews had converted the Gentile court into a trading post, and so Jesus comes along and reminds them. "He told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume Me." (John 2:16-17; Psalm 69:9). Oh, how I wish I could throw out what doesn't belong when I see care homes turn chapels into storage facilities or meeting rooms. But I can't. I'm not Jesus. I can't throw them out, but I can pray for them. That's what our text encourages us to do, to pray.

Our Psalm today also encourages us to pray. "Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for You judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth" (67:3-4). All people! Nations! Pray, praise and give thanks! Let God do the

judging of other people. Trust in His justice and righteousness. You are to pray for people, and when you get a chance, tell them about Jesus.

Neither the condemnation of a person in hell, nor their salvation is up to you. That all weighs on God's shoulders. Take a close look at our text and you'll see that. God says, "My salvation". It's not your salvation to hand out. God says, "I will bring to My holy mountain", I will "make them joyful in My house of prayer", I gather "the outcast of Israel", "I will gather yet others". God gathers us here to His house of prayer. He gathers others whom we may view as outcasts and not truly appreciate them being here. He gathers all people to His house of prayer, and then He brings people to His holy mountain.

God's holy mountain is another repeated phrase throughout the Bible referring to heaven. Hear it again in Psalm 43:3, "Send out Your light and Your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your dwelling!" You can use that Psalm to form your prayers for others.

Put the foreigners and the outcasts of our town into that prayer, "Send out Jesus and the Holy Spirit; let them lead Hector; let them bring Maria to Your holy hill and to heaven!" You know the names of your family members who are not keeping the sabbath, the names of your neighbours, and the names of your enemies. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). In this house of prayer we can pray for more than just ourselves and those whom we're friends with. We're to pray for all people. God our Saviour, "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

So, think of all people as God thinks of them, of wanting them to be here. Envision them as being here already, and then see how differently you think of them, and treat them. Yet, remember it's God who does that gathering. I don't want to place any burden upon you and leave you thinking that it's up to you. I want you to leave thinking about praying for all people, praying for them here, and praying for them at home. Pray when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. Pray for all for Jesus' sake.

So, where is Jesus in our text? The entire Old Testament points to Jesus. Did you spot Him? He's in the last verse. "The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to **Him** besides those already gathered."" (v. 8). God gathers us to **Jesus** – to see Him as our Saviour from Sin, Death and the Devil. God gathered you to Jesus' cross of crucifixion for Your sins through your baptism. God gathers you to the forgiveness of Jesus through Holy Communion. And God gathers you away from the Devil and hell to His Holy Mountain in heaven through the resurrection of Jesus. Amen.