

# What's The Difference

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, let's open up our Bibles once more to Isaiah chapter 55. Isaiah chapter 55. We took a one-week hiatus, a little detour in Deuteronomy last week, but we're back to Isaiah chapter 55, and we're going to focus in on verses 8 and 9 this morning.

So Isaiah chapter 55, verses 8 and 9. But for the sake of context, I'm going to begin reading in verse 6 all the way through verse 9.

So Bibles open. Follow along with me as I read. Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

[ 1 : 13 ] Let's pray once more. Lord, we praise you for your unfailing word. It's powerful when we open it up, when we read it, when we seek to understand it by the help of your spirit.

And so we pray now that as we spend the next bit of our time together, Lord, unpacking this passage, would you give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts that would rejoice at the truth that we see.

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Well, it may be hard to believe, but the numbers will show that most Americans say that they believe in God.

In fact, almost every poll that I've seen, Gallup, Pew Research, Lifeway, they all do these polls.

They all say that over 80% of Americans will say that they believe in God.

But when you dig a little bit into their responses, sadly, the truth starts to come out. You start to see that they may believe in a God, but they have no idea who he is.

[ 2 : 28 ] And perhaps a better question in our day and in our time than do you believe in God might be, do you believe in sin? Lifeway published a study in 2016.

That's just six years ago now, but I don't think much has changed in a positive direction since then. And in that study, over 80% of Americans said that they believe in God.

And that was the headline. Good news. Everybody believes in God. And that may sound good, but then again, you keep on digging and it gets a little bit more concerning.

Here's what it says. Two-thirds, 65%, agreed that everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.

A few Americans seem to think that most sins put them in spiritual danger. Three-quarters, 74% of Americans disagreed with the idea that even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.

[ 3 : 32 ] That includes almost two-thirds, 62%, who strongly disagreed. And even amongst those who believe in the concept of sin, most replied that they simply work on themselves, try to better themselves, rather than rely on Jesus Christ to free them from their sin.

Now, in other words, according to this survey from Lifeway, most Americans, if you ask them, would say that if there is a God, then he must approve of what I do, must approve of who I am.

He must think like me. He must act like me. He must be just like me. Me. In short, they do not grasp the holiness of God, the depth of our sin, and our desperate need for God's mercy.

Without this fundamental understanding of who we are and who God is, of course, there is no need for repentance. Throughout our passage, Isaiah chapter 55, Isaiah has been speaking to sinners.

And he's been calling them to repentance, inviting them. The Israelites have been exiled for their sin. They are out of their land. They're enduring punishment from the hand of a holy God for their sin against the Lord.

[ 4 : 58 ] But yet he offers them hope. You remember this from a couple of weeks ago. Isaiah 55, verses 6 and 7, it says, Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way. That's repentance. And the unrighteous man, his thoughts. This was a call for total repentance. And we saw one main reason why in verse 7.

It says, God will abundantly pardon any sinner who comes to him in faith. But this morning, in our verses, verses 8 and 9, we're going to see another reason that Isaiah gives us to repent.

And this is a bigger reason. It's a foundational reason that undergirds and supports this call for repentance and God's eagerness to forgive.

And it's simply this. God is not like us. God is not like us.

[ 6 : 00 ] And so this morning, if you're a note taker, this is our outline. We're going to see that in two ways here. This is two reasons to repent. Isaiah gives us two reasons to repent.

This is our outline. If you're a note taker, I encourage you. It'll help you to follow along. Isaiah says, First, repent because God is far holier than us.

And second, repent because God is far more merciful than us. Two reasons to repent.

One, because God is far holier than us. And two, because God is far more merciful than us. First, we should repent of our sin because God is far holier than us.

Look again to verse 7. Isaiah says, he says, Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. And then verse 8, he says, In other words, Isaiah says that if we are to come to the Lord, we need to recognize that there is a gap between our thoughts and our ways and the Lord's thoughts and the Lord's ways.

[ 7 : 20 ] Our ways are wicked. They need forsaking. But his ways are holy. God never needs to apologize. He never needs to forsake any of his ways.

He never needs to try again. Every one of his ways for all of eternity has always been right and good and true.

You and I, we can hardly go five seconds without making some sort of mistake, without sinning against the Lord. And Isaiah says that our thoughts are wicked.

Though maybe we can, from the outside, deceive one another and make ourselves look presentable and better than we actually are. But our internal life, our internal thoughts, our internal wickedness, it accuses us.

Isaiah says our plans and our motives, our intentions, our thoughts are wicked. And God sees them all. But the thoughts and the plans and the motives and the intentions of God are pure.

[ 8 : 24 ] They're right and they're perfect. He has never thought a wrong thought and never planned a poor plan. There is nothing impure or wrong in him whatsoever. And the biblical word for this is holiness.

It's holiness. And this is Christianity 101. God is holy and we are not. There is a gap here between him and us.

And you might be prompted to ask, well, how much holier is he than us? How big is that gap? How far does it expand? You know, there's several good illustrations that I've learned over the years of how to explain and illustrate the gospel.

And one of them is a tool that I learned in college called the bridge diagram. I wonder, you may be familiar with what I'm talking about here. You take a sheet of paper or a napkin or whatever you have nearby and you draw two cliffs.

One on the left side of the paper, one on the right side of the paper. And in between is this gap, this unbridgeable gap. And you're taught, as you're taught to present this, to write Romans 6.23 up on top of the page, which says, the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[ 9 : 45 ] So on the left side is man with all of his wages, which is sin and death and separation. And on the right side over here is God and his holiness.

And this gap is meant to illustrate the separation that has taken place because of our sin. And of course, what is there to bridge the gap? It's the free gift of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so you draw a cross there that forms a bridge to bridge the gap. That's why they call it the bridge diagram. It's an excellent illustration. I use it all the time. I have one problem with it.

It is not drawn to scale. This gap between us and God cannot fit on a napkin. You cannot peer across it and just see God on the other side.

The distance between our wickedness and God's holiness is infinite, is far, far greater than you and I tend to realize.

[10:50] Look there to verse 9 with me. Isaiah says, For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

As high as the heavens are from the earth. In other words, Isaiah is saying this is an immeasurable difference. An infinite distance.

When you go outside and you stand with your feet on the ground and you look up into the sky, how far up does it go? You don't know. I don't know.

We can't measure it. We can't comprehend how vast and high and measureless the heavens go.

You've probably made the same mistake that I have before, and you've let a balloon go out into the wind.

A gust of wind comes by, you're holding a balloon, and whoosh, off it goes. And you follow it as far as your eyes can follow it until it just is a little speck on the horizon, and then it's gone.

[11:51] God says, keep going. Beyond that, my ways and my thoughts are even higher and even greater and even further, even more incomprehensible than this.

God is holy, holy, holy, and we are not. And until we grasp this, friend, we cannot come to him.

Until the weight of this gap between us and God becomes clear to us in our heart, we cannot be saved. Until we recognize that God is holy and we are not, we cannot be saved.

But when we see this, when we get this, that he is so far above and beyond who we are, everything changes.

Everything changes. Do you realize the gap that there is between us and God? That he is holy and that we are wicked.

[13:04] Isaiah knew this firsthand, didn't he? And one place we see this gap very clearly is right here in Isaiah at the beginning of this book. If you would turn to me to Isaiah chapter 6.

Isaiah chapter 6. And this is the account of when Isaiah was called to be God's prophet here.

And you may remember that in Isaiah chapter 6, he saw a vision of the Lord that almost undid him.

And so you look there in Isaiah chapter 6, verse 1, it says this.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. And the train of his robe filled the temple.

And above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings. With two he covered his face. And with two he covered his feet. And with two he flew. And one called to the other and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

[14:07] The whole earth is filled with his glory. And the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called. And the house was filled with smoke. And I said, look at this response.

Woe is me. For I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips. And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. And then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.

And he touched my mouth and said, behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away.

And your sin is atoned for.

See, Isaiah saw the holiness of God. He saw the holiness of God. I see three responses here to the holiness of God.

[15:06] That when this gap was made clear to Isaiah, and this ought to be our response as well. It's three responses. It's to revere, to repent, and to receive.

When the holiness of God becomes clear to you, revere, repent, and receive. Number one, see, a clear view of God's holiness ought to lead us to reverence.

And the seraphim flying around the Lord, what did they say? Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is filled with the glory of God.

We see the same image in Revelation, don't we? We've been studying Revelation in Sunday school. The four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within. And day and night, they never cease to say, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come.

[16:05] And this is reverence. Not only this. Second, for sinners like us, seeing the holiness of God ought to lead us to repentance. Forsake your wicked ways.

Forsake your wicked thoughts. For his ways are higher. His ways are better. They are unlike ours. They are holy. So Isaiah says, woe is me.

I'm unclean. My lips are unclean. My people are unclean. And we need our sins atoned for. We need some way to bridge this gap between our uncleanness and God's holiness.

Which is why, third, if we see God's holiness for all it is, we must receive atonement. We must receive atonement.

This beautiful picture of atonement in Isaiah chapter 6, verse 6. He says, behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for.

[17:08] The only hope for sinners like me and like you in the presence of a holy God is that he would provide atonement for our sins.

That we would receive, not earn, receive the atonement that he has provided. Have you glimpsed the holiness of God?

Revere him. Do you fear the holiness of God? Do you fear his wrath against your sin? Repent of your sin. Do you stand in need of atonement?

What do you receive? What he's offering you this morning in Christ. Forgiveness in abundance. J. Alec Motier, he commented on this passage.

He said this. What a wonderful thing repentance must be if it can bridge such a gap. Can so small a thing be so effective?

[18:16] And if so, wherein lies its power? Its power is in our second point this morning. And it's this. Second, repent because God is far more merciful than us.

See, the power of repentance to bridge the gap between our sin and God's holiness, it does not lie in us.

It is not in our ability to repent. It is not in anything in us. It is not in our doing. It is not in our earning. There is no ladder that we can climb to bridge that gap that stands between us and God.

It lies in the merciful heart of God alone. The ability to be saved and to receive atonement for our sin depends entirely on God's willingness to save sinners.

Repentance is powerful because God is merciful. He saved us, Titus says, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but because of his great mercy.

[19:31] You see, the only hope for sinners like us is that God is not only different from us in holiness, but that he is also different from us in mercy. And this, I think, is what Isaiah is really wanting to emphasize here in the passage.

I want you to look one more time at verses 7 and 8. And I want you to ask yourself, what is that for doing here? What is that word for doing there in verse 8?

That word for is a connector. It gives a reason for what he has just said. So what does it say? It says, let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon for.

So there's the connector. My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, declares the Lord. So what is that for connecting?

Well, theologians have recognized that while Isaiah is, yes, he is highlighting the differences between God's holiness and our wickedness, there's an even closer connection here.

[20:40] Do you see it? This not like us is connecting God's heart of mercy for sinners. It's connected to God's heart of mercy.

He is not like us in his eagerness to show compassion. He is not like us in his eagerness to show pardon and abundance.

And isn't that good news for sinners this morning? That God is not like us. He is merciful beyond measure. And we have spurned him, yet his love remains steadfast.

His sure love for David. We have been faithless, yet God has remained faithful. We have run from him in rebellion, yet God runs toward us in mercy.

We have not sought the Lord. We have sought satisfaction in false joys, false hope, false pleasures, false gods. But the Son of God, the Son of Man, has come to seek and to save the lost.

[21:45] God is not like us. God is not like us. When we are wronged or offended or annoyed or inconvenienced, how do we respond?

God is not like us. We want justice right then. Right there. If you are like me, right then. Especially if we know that we can benefit in some way.

If it makes us look better. If it earns us some advancement. We want punishment. But God says, let the wicked person come to me. That I might forgive and show compassion.

And demonstrate my heart of mercy. God is not like us. You may remember the story of David in the Old Testament.

I know everybody remembers his one big sin. The episode with Bathsheba and Uriah and all the fallout that came because of the horrible ways that David sinned against the Lord.

[ 22 : 42 ] But like us, David was not a one-time sinner. The Bible presents more of his story than that. In 1 Chronicles 21.

You don't have to turn there now, but maybe mark that for later. 1 Chronicles 21. It gives us another example of David's sin. And it says that David directly disobeyed a command of God.

And he counted up the Israelites. He composed a census. And this was something God had commanded them not to do. Very explicitly. And so this displeased the Lord.

It was sin. But God did something really interesting. I don't know if you're familiar with this story. He gave David a choice for how he would punish David. Three options.

He says, choose what you will. Either three years of famine. Or three months of devastation by your foes with the sword of your enemies while they overtake you.

[ 23 : 39 ] Or else, three days of the sword of the Lord. Pestilence in the land with the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.

Three options. I wonder which one you would choose. I wonder which one I would choose. You might look at the length of the sentence and say, okay, well, three years is a long time.

Three months is a little less than that. And three days is even less than that. Maybe that's the best option. I can tolerate maybe anything for three days. Or you could look at the severity of the punishment and say, well, three years of famine.

Let me think about that. That would wipe out an economy. That would cause widespread suffering in the land. We'd have to take time to rebuild our whole nation.

Three months of war with our enemies being conquered. We'd lose lives. We'd lose resources. But I've seen what the angel of the Lord can do. Unlimited strength.

[ 24 : 39 ] Unlimited power. He could wipe us out completely with a blink of an eye. What could he do in three days of the wrath of the angel of the Lord?

Or you could choose as David did. And look at the character of the one bringing the punishment. So he says in 1 Chronicles 21, 13.

He says, I am in great distress. No kidding. He says, let me fall into the hand of the Lord. For his mercy is very great.

But do not let me fall into the hand of men. See, his hope in the face of the wrath of God against his sin was the merciful heart of God towards sinners.

Do you see that? The hope of David in the face of God's wrath towards sin was the heart of mercy that God has towards sinners.

[ 25 : 45 ] And this is what Isaiah is telling us. He's telling us God is far more merciful than us. So often we think that we have to just plow through God's hard exterior to make our way to mercy, to make our way to forgiveness, that we have to push through a layer of reluctance and anger and judgment to get to his love.

That's how it is with us when we're offended. That's not how it goes with God. God is far more merciful than us. He's full of mercy towards sinners.

Isn't this what we see in Psalm chapter 103? The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, does that sound familiar? As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.

[ 26 : 59 ] As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion toward those who fear him.

What a God we serve. What a hope he's given us. This passage in Isaiah is an invitation for sinners to repent, to forsake your sin, to turn from false joys, false gods, false hopes, and come into the open arms of your heavenly Father and find compassion and mercy and love unlike anything you've

ever known.

But you may ask, how can that be? How can an infinitely holy God show mercy to sinners? Wouldn't that compromise his holiness just to wipe away someone else's sin? Wouldn't that undermine his goodness, his holiness, to show mercy and compassion to those who don't deserve it?

Wouldn't that undermine his justice? And how could it be fair when all have sinned for some to receive pardon and some to be punished? And the answer, of course, is the gospel.

[ 28 : 25 ] It's the gospel of Jesus Christ. He alone bridges the gap. God's thoughts are not like ours, church, from before the foundation of the world.

Before there was sin, before there was you, before there was me, before there was a need for redemption at all, God planned in his mind to show mercy and grace to sinners.

And God's ways are not like our ways. He accomplished this redemption in the most stunning way imaginable. By creating and preparing a world.

Creating and preparing a people. Creating and preparing a time for the incarnation of his own son. And when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son to come and to live and to die and to rise on behalf of sinners.

So that any sinner who turns from their sin and comes to Christ will be saved. Have you come to him? Do you know him?

[ 29 : 37 ] Do you know this mercy of God? See, the gospel is how God can be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

He is holy and he is merciful. Get this, church. The gospel tells us that because of the mercy of God, his holiness is no longer our enemy.

It is our only hope. For any who are in Christ, instead of pouring out wrath against us in our sin, the holiness of God in Christ thrusts us upward toward him in a wave of undeserved mercy and grace.

And this is, as the Christmas carol says, it's tidings of comfort and tidings of joy. I went to put up Christmas lights on the house the other day.

Did anybody notice? And we did all the prep work and laid out the lights, tested them, made sure they worked, lined them up on the ground exactly how we wanted them to go up on the house.

[ 30 : 52 ] And then I got on my ladder and realized that my ladder was too small. I couldn't reach the roof. No matter how I positioned it, the bushes were either in the way or the ladder was too small.

I tried to straddle the bushes. No luck. Amanda said, just do it anyways. Jump and pull yourself up. I said, I don't know who you think I am, but that's, I'm not risking my bones for these lights.

The gap was too big. Isaiah wants us to see that the gap between us and God is too big.

It cannot be reached just by a bigger ladder. Every other religion in the world would give you another ladder to climb.

They would tell you to get a bigger ladder. And we tend to operate that way too, don't we? Let me try harder. Let me climb further. Let me do differently.

[ 31 : 58 ] Let me work harder. Let me be better. The good news of the gospel is that because of the incredible, merciful heart of God, God gives us exactly what He demands of us, His holiness.

God gives us what he demands of us. He bridges the gap, not by giving us a ladder to climb, but by sending his own son down to us to bring us up to him.

Who could dream up such an amazing story of redemption, such an amazing display of both holiness and mercy? Only God. His thoughts are not our thoughts, church.

His ways are not our ways. Would you pray with me? Lord, we thank you for the gospel, that in the gospel of Christ you give to us what you demand of us.

You give us the perfection of Christ, to be received by any who come to him in faith. Lord, as we enter into this Christmas season, we pray, Father, that our hearts would be right with you, that you would remove distractions and busyness so that we could worship you as you deserve, that we might revere you as you deserve, that we might repent of sin as you deserve, that we might receive the sacrifice of Christ and live and know true and total, complete pardon and forgiveness.

[ 33 : 42 ] Lord, we love you and we pray that you would receive all glory and honor. You are holy, holy, holy. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.