

**GOD INVITES DIRTY PEOPLE****ISAIAH 1:18**

As he greeted the congregation streaming out of the sanctuary, a woman named Janie shook his hand and urgently asked if she could talk with him after he finished. He knew something was wrong even before he was finally able to talk with Janie that Sunday morning. She threw her arms around him and began to sob. He looked into her face and saw there how drugs and hard living had plowed furrows into it way beyond her years. Her eyes were filled with pain. "Pastor, I stumbled... Is there hope for me?" Janie continued to sob. She had slipped back into her addiction in a two day binge. Since then she had been staying away from church because she couldn't imagine that the Lord would forgive her, or that she would be accepted by her new Christian friends. Every pastor has had something like that happen. I have as well. Well, you be the judge today. Is there hope for Janie? Is there hope for you and me and for whatever we've done or how we've failed?

Last Sunday I began a message series entitled "Our Inviting God." Each Bible passage we're going to consider over these six Sundays has one thing in common – the word "come." "Come" is the universal word of invitation. The Bible clearly demonstrates that God is an inviting God. He's not some aloof, cold, unfeeling Supreme Being who resides in an unapproachable castle in the clouds in some remote corner of the universe. Now, last week we began this series of messages being reminded that because God is an inviting God, He invites us to invite other people to Him. Followers of Jesus – even though we are sinful ourselves... even though we are "damaged goods"... even though we struggle with our own doubts and fear – are called and expected to be spiritual inviters. By God's grace and plan, we are called to be human channels of a divine message. Every... last... one... of... us!

All of us need to be reminded of that wonderful fact often, but specifically because on Sunday, September 15 we are participating in the National Back to Church Sunday event. We are encouraging and asking you to intentionally invite specific people to join us for church that day. Pick them up and bring them if they need a ride! We're going to have a great service that day. One of our own, Ed Kapustin, is going to give his personal testimony. A student praise band from the Campus Crusade ministry at Ohio State is going to lead our music that day. After the service, we're going to offer "walking tacos" where folk can enjoy a light meal while we chat with them in the lobby, the fellowship hall or show them around the facility. Again, postcards about the event are available after the service if you think that would help you in inviting others to that service.

Now, last week we observed that if you're going to become a spiritual inviter, you're going to have to get Jesus' eyes for lost people. You're going to need to develop the ability to see beyond what lost people are today to what they can become tomorrow by God's grace. The fact is that God invites people into a relationship with Him who are spectacularly unworthy of His grace and love.

Now, today, I want us to look at just one verse in the Bible that reminds us that God invites dirty people. Sin makes you and me spiritually dirty before God. As a result, we need a spiritual bath. We need to get cleaned up spiritually. Every ... last... one... of... us! The verse I'm referring to is in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet who lived some 700-800 years before Jesus. He spoke on God's behalf to the nation of Israel. The Jewish people had turned their back on God. They were worshiping other gods. They were mistreating each other. Using Isaiah as His mouthpiece, God had a message for His people. It's a message that each of us need to hear today either for the first time ever or perhaps for the 1000<sup>th</sup> time. Let's read that verse now. Here are five brief truths suggested by just that one verse. First of all...

### **GETTING CLEANED UP IS A COMMAND.**

Yes, the word "come" is an invitation. But in that verse the word "come" is an imperative. It's a command. There's a big difference between Dad saying, "Come here, Johnny, look at this, would ya?" and when Dad says, "Come here, Johnny, right now." The same word is used – "come." But the first sounds more like an invitation; the second more like a command. God commands us to get cleaned up. It's not a suggestion. It's not a recommendation. It's not an expert opinion. Through the Holy Spirit, He looks you and me right in the face – spiritually speaking – and says, "You are dirty. You are a mess. The dirt and sin in your life is offensive to Me. Come. You must get cleaned up."

Two things make any command legitimate. First, the person making the command has to have legitimate authority to do so. Generals command colonels who command majors and right on down the chain of command. Privates don't command generals. CEOs, at the workplace, command those who work for them. The guy stuck in an office cubicle on the tenth floor doesn't tell the chairman of the board what to do. Parents ought to command their kids when necessary. Kids should not tell parents what to do. God is the creator and the sustainer of the universe. This is His show from first to last. He's in charge. And because He created you, He is in charge of you ultimately. God has every right to command you simply because of who He is.

What makes a command legitimate? The person making the command has to have legitimate authority to do so. Secondly, the command itself has to be legitimate. No general has the right to tell a private to shoot and kill an unarmed civilian. No CEO has the right to ask an employee to do something dishonest. No parent has the right to insist a child do something immoral. God makes the most legitimate and much needed command here that He could ever make. The all too obvious fact is that we are dirty. We are sinful. We have rebelled against the rightful Ruler of the universe. We have made an unholy mess out of this world and out of our own lives.

On March 18, 1937, a spark ignited a cloud of natural gas that had accumulated in the basement of the only school in the town of London, Texas. The blast killed 293 people most of them children. The explosion happened because the local school board wanted to cut heating costs. Natural gas, the byproduct of oil extraction, was siphoned from a neighboring pipeline to fuel the building's furnace free of charge. One good thing came of that disastrous event. The federal government from then on required companies to add an odor to natural gas. That distinctive aroma of natural gas is now so familiar that we often forget that natural gas is naturally odorless. But when we smell that odor we know that something is wrong.

What's the point? Sin has a spiritual odor. A sense of guilt... a sense of deep conviction... an overwhelming realization that you have offended the God of the universe is like an odor that reminds each of us that we are dirty. We desperately need to get cleaned up! You can ignore a suggestion, a recommendation, and even an expert opinion. But you dare not ignore this legitimate, rightful command from the only One who has the right to make it. Getting cleaned up spiritually is a command. Do it! Secondly...

### **GETTING CLEANED UP IS AN INVITATION.**

I love that little word after the word "come" in Isaiah 1:18 – the word "now." "Come now..." It softens that word of command, "come", doesn't it? It tells us something wonderful about the heart of God. God is an inviting God. This isn't just a cold, formal command to stop being dirty and get cleaned up. It's a gracious, loving invitation that reveals something of God's tenderness and mercy. I don't think any of us fully understand what happens both in the heart of God and the courts of Heaven when dirty people get cleaned up. We get a glimpse of it in one of Jesus' statements. He said, "In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." (Lk 15:10 NLT) When you allow God to clean up your life, it brings great joy to the heart of God. When dirty people get cleaned up down here on Earth, a party breaks out up in Heaven! Getting cleaned up is an invitation. Thirdly ...

### **GETTING CLEANED UP MAKES SENSE.**

What does God mean when He says, "Come now, let us reason together'..." (Is 1:18 NIV)? It almost sounds like God is suggesting we sit down together at the local Starbucks and have a friendly discussion about getting cleaned up. But that's not the right mental image at all. God is saying here that getting cleaned up just makes good sense. When you live a life that is sinful before God, rebellious against God – in thought, in word, in attitude, in actions – it just doesn't make any sense ultimately. Why not? Because this is God's universe and He made the rules. He's already determined that sin in any and all of its forms will ultimately lead to death. He's already determined that those who prefer to stay dirty spiritually and not receive the spiritual bath He alone can provide are

choosing an eternity separated from God in a place called Hell. Sin results in death spiritually, eternally, emotionally, relationally, morally and even physically. Does it make any sense to pursue a course of action that results in death? What makes sense in the universe – the only universe you and I will ever live in – has already been decided by God. Does it make sense, then, to live your life in such a way that matches up with who God is and what He wants? Yes!

Suppose two people were stranded out in the ocean some 500 miles from shore. One of them is an Olympic champion swimmer while the other person can barely dog paddle. Which one is going to survive? Neither one. No swimmer - no matter how gifted – can swim 500 miles. Suppose that a rescue helicopter appeared overhead and dropped a rescue line. Which one is going to be rescued? Whoever grabs the line and gets lifted to safety! The Bible says each and everyone one of us are beyond hope spiritually speaking – 500 miles from shore. No matter how good and moral you may be when compared with other human beings, you are not good and moral enough before an absolutely holy God. Every last one of us needs a savior. The ones who get rescued are those who accept the fact that they're dirty and come to God for cleansing.

That makes sense, doesn't it? It makes sense to obey God's gracious invitation – “come now” – and believe the fact that although your sins may be many and great, they are not bigger than God. It makes sense to do things God's way especially after we've made such a colossal mess by trying to do things our own way. It makes sense to believe that a great, sovereign God has the power to cleanse away our many sins simply because of who He is. You and I need to remember this simple, wonderful truth when we think of inviting people to Back to Church Sunday, specifically, or inviting people to Jesus, generally. Don't ever assume someone is too dirty for God! He is all about turning great sinners into great saints. In fact, from my experience as a pastor, it is often much harder to get someone who is moral and upright to realize he or she needs a Savior than someone who's sinfulness is very obvious to the whole world. I love the saying, “There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.” (Corrie ten Boom) Getting cleaned up just makes sense – all the sense in the world! Fourthly ...

### **GETTING CLEANED UP DEPENDS ON GOD'S INITIATIVE.**

The verse says, “Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD...” (Is 1:18 NIV) This wasn't Isaiah, the prophet's, idea. The command and the invitation came from God and God alone. If God doesn't make forgiveness and cleansing away of sin possible somehow, it isn't going to happen. The fact is that many times we forgive ourselves and try to cleanse away our own sin. We do a lot of self-forgiveness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor, who was executed in a Nazi concentration camp, had a memorable phrase for it. He called it “cheap grace.” Cheap grace is the grace we give to ourselves. We say, “Well, yes, what I did was wrong, but in the grand scheme of things it doesn't really matter all that much.” It matters to God. Or, we think, “I'm not as dirty as

that person over there. Did you hear what he did? Do you know how she acted?" But the standard is never you, or me or other people. You'll always be able to find people both cleaner and dirtier than you. The only standard that matters in God's universe is God Himself. If God doesn't do the cleaning up – in His way and on His terms - you just stay dirty.

In just a few minutes, we're going to celebrate the wonderful fact that God did, in fact, take the initiative in getting us cleaned up. The Bible makes it clear that God sent His son to die upon the cross and then rise from the dead. That act paid the penalty for your dirt, my dirt and the dirt of the whole world. No one asked God to do that. No one forced God to do that. It was completely at His own initiative. The Bible says, "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Rom 5:8 NLT) Getting cleaned up depends on God's initiative from first to last. Finally ...

### **GETTING CLEANED UP HAPPENS ONCE AND OFTEN.**

There's a kind of cleansing that happens when you first respond to God's invitation. Each of us has been born with a sinful nature – which is a kind of built in predisposition to live in a way that dishonors God. It's an almost unconscious rebellious spirit or attitude against God and His loving control over us. When you first realize what God has done for you through His Son, Jesus, you come to Him confessing your sins and asking for His forgiveness. God forgives you of all those many, individual acts of sin you have committed up to that point in time – up until that moment of confession. But His forgiveness goes deeper than that. He also covers that inner spirit of rebellion – that sinful nature – which is really the source of every sin you ever commit past, present or future with the blood of Jesus, in a spiritual sense. That kind of spiritual bath happens once – the moment you're converted, saved, born again, receive Jesus as Lord and Savior – whatever terminology you prefer.

But every follower of Jesus here has learned that we need continual cleansing, don't we? That sinful nature isn't ripped out of us the minute we trust in Jesus for salvation. As a result, even sincere followers of Jesus commit sins from time to time. We still get dirty. That saddens God, but never surprises Him. God in His grace has made provision for that need, too. He offers a continual opportunity to get cleaned up. Do you hear it in these words, "...if we admit our sins—make a clean breast of them—he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing." (1 John 1:9 MSG) That was written to people who were already followers of Jesus. Some of us have gotten into a very good, worthwhile habit of asking God to give us a spiritual bath daily. Take seriously the opportunity to receive continual cleansing. Partaking of the Lord's Supper regularly is yet another opportunity to ask God to clean us up continually. We live in a very dirty world. As a result, we pick up some the muck and mire of this world as we walk through it. It's almost inevitable. This morning we come to ask God to give us a spiritual bath – to cleanse away every sinful thought, action

and attitude – and make us clean. The Bible says, “...the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7 NLT)

In 1818, Ignaz Phillip Semmelweis was born into a world of dying women. The finest hospitals lost one out of six young mothers in those days. Back then, a doctor’s daily routine began with performing autopsies which required dissecting corpses. From there he made his way to the hospital to examine expectant mothers without ever washing his hands. Dr. Semmelweis was the first man in history to associate such examinations with resulting infection and death. He began to wash his hands with a chlorine solution. After 11 years and the delivery of 8,537 babies, he lost only 184 mothers – about one in fifty rather than one in six. He began to lecture and debate with his colleagues. Once he argued, “[Infection] is caused by decomposed material conveyed to a wound. I have shown how it can be prevented. I have proved all that I have said. But while we talk, talk, talk, women are dying. I am not asking anything world shaking. I am asking you only to wash. For God’s sake, wash your hands!” But almost no one believed him. Doctors and midwives had been delivering babies for thousands of years without washing their hands. Why start now? Ignaz Phillip Semmelweis died insane at the age of 47 because no one would listen to him and women get dying needlessly.

I think of what Jesus said to Simon Peter before He washed his feet. Do you remember how Simon resisted at first until Jesus said to him, “...‘Unless I wash you, you won’t belong to me’” (Jo 13:8 NLT)? God invites dirty people. God invites you and me to invite other dirty people to Him so they can be washed and cleansed as well. For God’s sake, wash. For your own sake, wash.