

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.” Perhaps, if you’ve heard this verse before, it was in the context of some tragedy or other terrible thing that happened. And it is a helpful verse in the face of such things, as it reminds us that we can’t and won’t always understand what goes on the world or why the Lord allows certain things to happen, but to trust in Him as our faithful Lord and Father.

That’s not the only application of this verse, though. It also is spoken by the prophet to tell of our Lord’s grace and mercy toward us. Isaiah gives several examples of this in the verses leading up to it, which forms our Old Testament reading. All of them go to show that, while our thoughts, specifically the thoughts coming from our old sinful flesh, are self-centered, the Lord’s thoughts are for mankind, whom He loves greatly.

So first up, our Lord shows through Isaiah how our thoughts are about getting what I deserve, while the Lord’s thoughts are about giving freely. The Lord says, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

When we hear an offer like that, what do we think? It almost seems too good to be true. It’s that bit of common worldly wisdom: “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.” We are geared, by our sinful nature and the reality that we live in a sinful world, to always see things as exchanges. You get something only if you give something first.

If someone wants to buy something, he better have enough money. If someone wants you to respect him, then he’ll need to earn your respect. If someone wants a favor from you, he’ll need to be willing to do something for you down the road.

And if we’re suspicious to receive “free” offers, we most certainly don’t just give away our stuff for free. Our sinful flesh loves to cling to what we have, what we’ve earned.

If we’re giving something away, it’s because we don’t want it anymore. To give away something of value to you, especially to someone who is a stranger or even someone you don’t care for, that’s just ridiculous or wasteful in the world’s eyes.

Now to be sure, we are called to be wise in our dealings with this world. The Lord Jesus says to His disciples, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” As Christians, we are to use wisdom and discernment so that we make the best use of what God has given us, and also so that we do not enable or feed the sins of laziness, greed, or theft in other people.

But we can’t use this caution as a justification for withholding generosity from others or caring only for those whom we think deserve it. We must be wise, but we must also trust our Lord to provide for us and not lean on our own understanding, as the Proverb says.

We can trust, because our Lord's ways and thoughts are higher than ours. He gives generously and freely, to the point of it seeming foolish to our human way of thinking. Just consider the verse again. He calls people to buy without price, without money. What does that even mean, to buy without money? The Lord's generosity is so great that it boggles our human mind.

Think about all the things He gives as free gifts. For starters, our very existence is a gift from Him. None of us "deserve" to have been created, but out of love God knit each of us together in our mothers' wombs. Every day since birth, the Lord has sustained our lives, again, as a free gift.

And He does this even for those who hate Him, who curse His name and spend their days denying His existence. As Jesus teaches, God the Father "makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." It's His sun, His creation, His universe, and He causes it to continue to sustain humanity day in and day out, because again, He loves us.

And all this pales compared to the greatest gift He has given: His own Son. St. Paul puts it wonderfully in Ephesians 2: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

We were dead, and not just dead, but enemies of God, our thoughts being evil, our ways marching toward destruction in hell, and God sent His Son to the cross to change all that. Not because we deserve it. Not because we could earn or buy it. He did it out of His love; His mercy.

It's not just wine and milk and bread that Isaiah speaks of; God is offering forgiveness, life, and salvation... for free! His thoughts are not our thoughts, and thanks be to Him for that, as it results in us being saved freely, by grace alone!

Related to this earned versus free thinking is the second point Isaiah brings forth: the fact that our thoughts, especially toward other people, are fickle and change frequently, whereas the Lord's thoughts are tied to His faithfulness, shown even toward those who are faithless. This comes across a little later in the text, when the Lord declares, "I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David."

David was a good king, the best one that the earthly kingdom of Israel ever had. But he was far from perfect, and in fact did some very horrible things, such as his murderous, adulterous dealings with Uriah and his wife, Bathsheba.

I'm sure you remember the story. Uriah is one of David's mighty men, an elite soldier. And Uriah is also faithful, to his brothers-in-arms, to his king, and to the Lord – despite the fact that he was born a Gentile, specifically a Hittite.

But David, who is being lazy and letting other people fight the battles while he stays home and lounges, sees Uriah's wife Bathsheba, lusts after her, sleeps with her, and then when it turns out she's pregnant, has faithful Uriah murdered to try to cover up the whole affair.

If you were in the position of God, how would you handle this? What would your thoughts be toward David? You elevated this lowly shepherd to be king of Your chosen people and forerunner of Your Son the Messiah, and this is how he acts? Throw the bum out! And for his crimes, put him to

death! He doesn't deserve a second chance after committing such a horrible crime! You can find a new king, someone who will be faithful and not murder faithful soldiers after sleeping with their wives. Raise that man up!

Isn't that how we – again, speaking of our sinful flesh – isn't that how we're tempted to deal with those who wrong us? Someone betrays our trust, then that trust is lost, and it'll be a long time coming before it's earned again. And if someone grieved us as badly as David grieved the Lord, we're probably writing that person out of our lives, cutting any ties or connections we've had.

Maybe we give someone we like a break, if the offense isn't too bad, but again with our worldly wisdom: "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." And we don't like to be shamed.

That's how our thoughts work. But what about the Lord's? How does He treat David? When David does these awful things, the Lord does send His prophet Nathan to confront David. But what is the purpose of this prophetic visitation? Not to tell him that he's fallen beyond any hope of redemption and the Lord is done with him. No, Nathan comes to call David to repentance. The fallen king is confronted with his sins so that he might confess them and then have the Lord forgive him and draw him back.

And in all of this, the Lord never cancels the unconditional covenant He made with David. Despite all those sins, the Messiah will come from the line of David, because God has promised this and He cannot go back on His word. Even as David's descendants wander further and further from the Lord, He remains faithful to His promises. He keeps a son of David on the throne of Judah until the kings' and people's sins become so great that God must cast them away into exile.

And even after this, He sustains the line of David, until one day when a man of the house of David named Joseph brings his betrothed to be registered in the city of David, and there, the promise made to David is fulfilled. The Messiah is born.

This faithfulness is the faithfulness which God shows to His people. That's the covenant, born out of His love, which He offers through the prophet Isaiah. He offers salvation, eternal life, not because you or I or anyone has been especially good or deserve it, but because of His steadfast love. All that is necessary for you and I to live with Him forever in heaven was accomplished by Jesus, the Son of David and the Son of God.

And when we sin against God and transgress the covenant He has made, He doesn't just wash His hands of us and find someone else to dwell with Him in paradise. No, He remains faithful and calls us to repentance, to return to Him and His love.

It doesn't matter how bad your sins are. It doesn't matter how many times you have committed them. He is always ready to forgive those who repent, always faithful to the covenant made by the blood He shed on the cross. As the Bible tells us, "if we are faithless, he remains faithful." His thoughts, including His thoughts of love and forgiveness and pardon, are not our thoughts, but are so much better.

This offer of pardon leads to the third way in which the Lord's thoughts are higher than ours. Our thoughts tend to focus on the present, here and now, but the Lord's thoughts are on eternity, the big picture. The Lord freely offers pardon and forgiveness with the end goal that we might be with Him forever. Think back to last week's sermon, how forgiveness is the thing needed that then lets us be healed and receive what is lastingly good.

Where are our thoughts, though? Many of them are just spur of the moment, reacting to what comes at us day by day. We often do what seems best in the moment, not really thinking much farther out than that.

Now it is true that we do make long-term plans – some people more than others. We have “five-year” plans for where we'd like to see ourselves in five years. We set career goals, things we'd like to accomplish or the path we'd like to take in a particular profession. We make bucket lists, things we want to do before we die. These are all far from spontaneous.

But here's the question: how many of the decisions we make do we make in light of eternity? When we plan on doing something that matters, does it matter eternally?

For instance, how much time do we devote to entertainment, which is nice now but has zero eternal benefits, versus how much time do we spend reading and studying God's Word, which strengthens faith that saves eternally?

Or when we're talking with our kids or grandkids or neighbor kids about what they want to do when they grow up, do we encourage them to do what they enjoy and what will make them happy, or do we encourage them to do what will allow them to attend church on Sundays and allow them raise a Christian family, so that their children might be in heaven with you?

When you think about where you'd like to retire to – if it isn't Rawlins, Wyoming – do you consider first and foremost if there is a faithful Lutheran church there, so that your soul would continue to be sustained in the later years of life, or does nice weather and close golf courses come first?

We could think through plenty of other examples, but I think you get the point. Very often, our priority is all about this life – maybe right now, maybe ten years from now, but still this life – and eternity is either just ignored or taken for granted.

This is a dangerous thing to do – just hear the words spoken through the prophet. “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.” Here we see our Lord direct our thoughts to eternity, and at the same time to right now. Those words speak a theme that will be picked up in the closing Sundays of the church year, the theme that this time of grace will not last forever. There is only a certain amount of time when the Lord may be found, when He is near.

This world, your life, they will end. And furthermore, you don't know when they'll end. You may very well face eternity next week, or tomorrow. Only God knows. He's the one who knows the day when you will stand before Him to give an account, as the Scriptures say. And that's why He calls all people to seek Him now, to repent of their sins now, to believe in Him now, because there may not be a tomorrow.

And this isn't just a call to repent, believe, and then go on doing whatever it is you want. It's a call to realize that what you do in this life very often either grows or harms your faith, which saves you for the life to come. That's what St. Paul is speaking about in our Epistle reading. He tells the Ephesians, "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil."

Remember, he's writing to Christians, and he doesn't tell them that since they have been baptized and say they believe in Jesus to just go out and have a blast until the Lord comes again. No, he reminds them that they are living in the midst of a fallen, evil world, and that they will be under constant pressure to yield to that world, to abandon the covenant which their faithful Lord has made to them.

Against this, Paul calls on them to live as Christians, contrary to the world. Don't spend your days getting drunk – "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die," but spend them filled with the Spirit and the fruits He gives. Let your speech and your song be influenced by the speech and song given by the Lord in the Scriptures.

Don't spend your days wanting more and more and more, pursuing that false god of mammon, but instead give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't harden your hearts against others and hold grudges, especially against those who also bear the name of Christ, but instead submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. If He was willing to suffer death on the cross to forgive someone, you most certainly can forgive them, too.

By ourselves, our own strength, our own desires, we couldn't hope to do this. It's all too far above us. God's thoughts and ways are higher. But in Baptism, God the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts and enlightens us by the Gospel. He creates in us a clean heart and a right spirit, that we might actually think the thoughts of Christ, walk in the ways of God.

God tells us in His Word, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Because you have been joined to Christ, joined to His death, joined to His resurrection, you can seek the thoughts of God.

His thoughts and His ways, high though they are, can be grasped by faith. We might not understand them. And the world will think we are absolutely stupid for following them. But we most certainly can believe them and then seek to walk accordingly. His ways and His thoughts are perfect, and they are always for our good.

In the name of Jesus, amen.