

Never have I preached on this text, and I wonder why not. Perhaps I did not think it applied to us all that much. After all, you are God's beloved children in Christ Jesus, not the wicked and unrighteous man, as the prophet says, who needs to forsake his way and his thoughts. Yet the prophet does say just two chapters before our text, "*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way.*" And in Genesis 6 God calls the thoughts of man's heart "*only evil continually.*" So maybe I've been too easy on you. The thoughts and the ways, even of God's children, are not pure but sinful.

But you already know this, don't you? The godly ones always feel their own imperfections. And they always, therefore, hunger for God's grace. And so you will accept the challenge to consider where your thoughts and ways have led you thus far. Are you content with where you are in life, and with where your path in life is going? But this really is not much of a challenge, for in Proverbs 16 we read, "*All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes.*"

We like self-evaluations, especially when it comes to God. Who would actually give himself a failing grade? Who really would say, "My thoughts are not right, and my ways are impure. Where I am in life is not where I need to be."

The godly, that's who. This may sound strange, but those who are on the way that is right are ready and willing to confess that their ways have been wrong. It is the wicked and unrighteous man who is unwilling to change his ways because he thinks that all his ways are pure.

But there is a better way. "*My thoughts are not your thoughts,*" says God, "*neither are your ways My ways.*" And then He says this, "*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.*"

The thoughts and ways of God differ from ours not just in degree, but in kind. The thoughts and ways of God are better than ours, yes, but not only better, they are completely different from ours; as different as heaven is from the earth. And that's different.

Here is how man thinks: "I'll do my best here on earth, and God will surely accept that." But God says what He thinks, "*You must be holy as I, the Lord your God, am holy...anything less is unacceptable.*"

The way man thinks is the way he acts. And also with God. "*You must be holy,*" He says. So He sends His own beloved Son into the world through whom we are declared holy and acceptable to God.

This is the better way. "*Returning to the Lord, that He may have compassion on (us), and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.*" We would never think in this way on our own. We would forever think and act as though we are fully responsible for getting into heaven – through our own way which, to our eyes, is pure and the right way.

Yet this is what the wicked and unrighteous man thinks. He has no use for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, because his thoughts are on himself and what he is doing, not on what Jesus has done for him.

There is room in God's kingdom for every sinner, for God has declared every sinner holy and just for Jesus' sake. But what good is that to the person who refuses Jesus? The wicked and unrighteous man is not the man who is the worst sinner on earth, but the man who cares nothing for God's promise to abundantly pardon his sins.

But this is God's way. Not to punish sinners, but to punish His own Son in our place. Yes, "*all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way.*" Yet in the same breath the prophet declares, "*and the Lord has laid on Him (Jesus) the iniquity of us all.*"

God's way is the way of showing mercy. He does not pick and choose who He shows mercy to. He is merciful to all. He has pardoned all. There is no sin you have done which is so hideous and perverse that it is outside the reach of God's mercy. Jesus bore that sin on His cross. There is no sinner who is too far gone. When Jesus stretched out His arms on the cross, He included everyone, including you. God doesn't just pardon you. He "*abundantly pardons*" cries the prophet.

Today, right now, God forgives you for Jesus' sake. And there is no limit to this forgiveness of God...except with regard to time. "*Seek the Lord while He may be found,*" says our text, "*Call upon Him while He is near.*" God's mercy will never end, but you will. Your life and mine hang by a thread. God's grace is here for you today and tomorrow, but will you be alive tomorrow?

And so now is the time, if you are not yet baptized, to be baptized into Christ Jesus. For here in this water, according to God's own promise, is His mercy and grace. Here is the blood of Christ for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

And if you are baptized, now is the time to return to your baptism. Your baptism has never left you, but you and I can leave our baptism. And so, no matter how far we have strayed as sinful sheep, let us "*return to the Lord, that He may have compassion on (us), and to our God, for He will...not might, but He will abundantly pardon.*" Amen.