metaphors go, this is strong language. God is weary of the empty rituals, sacrifices, and burnt offerings of the Israelites. Their words are meaningless because their hearts are empty. Their offerings are useless because their souls are tarnished by sin. Their worship displeases God because they forgot why they were doing what they were doing. Now, God is fed up: “Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me” (vv. 12-13). God is tired of their dirty hands and faces, their empty hearts, and their worthless praise. Listen to how God feels: “I cannot endure…my soul hates…a burden to me…I am weary…I hide my eyes from you…I will not listen” (vv. 14-15). These are harsh words from a disheartened God.

As we hear God’s exasperation with the Israelites, we should ask ourselves: Do we, like Israel, need to be washed clean spiritually? Does God find our worship to be a burden? Does God simply “endure” our empty worship. To what extent has our faith become mere ritual, without spiritual content? Is God pleased by our praise, or are we too distracted to remember why we come to worship? Is God happy with the sectarian spirit of our age? Does it grieve the heart of God to see that we can no longer dwell in unity (Psalm 133:1), or live without “selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better” than themselves? (Philippians 2:3). Is God completely “weary” of it all. What does God suggest?

**The Six-Step System.** Here is what God says: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean” (v. 16). God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, recommends a six-step process: cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow (vv. 16-17). These six steps can be accomplished through three primary actions: stop doing bad things; start doing good things; and take the side of the oppressed. When we do these three things, we may consider ourselves clean, righteous, pure, and holy in the eyes of the Lord.

*Stop doing bad things*. Cease doing that which is evil. To stop doing what is habitual takes discipline and will. Which is why God rewords this imperative, changing it from “cease” to “remove.” It is as though evil exists within us as a putrid, cancerous tumor that must be removed surgically. Excised. Cut out. Hacked and chopped. God wants us to remove the temptations so we may cease doing what is wrong. “Remove the evil of your doings before my eyes,” God says (v. 16).

*Start doing good things.* “Learn to do good,” God says, suggesting that we may not know how to do good. Learning requires a teachable spirit, the openness to a new idea, the willingness to try something different. We may also need to unlearn what not to do. Think of an athlete. Any great athlete is *coachable*. Teachable. She is willing and eager to learn. She can also *unlearn* the bad habits that inhibit her from competing successfully. Mediocre players never unlearn their bad habits and so do not become great athletes. This is what God is saying to us: *learn, then unlearn*. Learn to do good, unlearn the evil.

*Always take the side of the powerless*. To be completely cleansed, one must put faith into action; in this case, by actively opposing injustice. Through Isaiah, God instructs to advocate for the orphan and the widow. Although orphanages are rare in the U.S. these days, millions of children are homeless and almost 500,000 children are in foster care. Additionally, 16 million kids are food insecure, not sure from where their next meal will come. As for widows, the need for advocacy in our country might not seem as relevant because women have more independence and resources; but when the scope is widened, the plight of widows globally approaches dire biblical proportions. Widows without family networks or social services may find it difficult to feed their children and may be pressed into trafficking situations. They may easily be ignored because their quiet voices are not heard by the men who make the decisions. God’s message through the prophet is this: *A righteous person will take meaningful action on behalf of the needy and helpless whether they are widows, orphans, poor or homeless.*

Reading Isaiah, you we might conclude that we cannot ever be clean enough. In truth, we cannot ever be too clean spiritually, too pure in our motives, too scrubbed of our faults because there is always more injustice to fight, another orphan to house or feed, and a widow for whom to care. Our failure to stop doing evil and start doing good and our failure to advocate for the helpless and needy *are sinful*! We may hesitate to use such language, but the Bible is unambiguous about the sinful nature of neglecting injustice, abandoning the poor, and disregarding the needy.

God expects a high level of moral cleanliness from us. But is that fair? Is God setting us up for failure? Yes! And No. “Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (v. 18). In Jesus Christ we are forgiven of our past sins and redeemed in the eyes of God. We are restored and made spotless because of Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection to new life. We are positioned, in Christ, to do the right thing, to act justly toward the exploited, and to be clean – white as snow – before God.

Frederick Lewis Donaldson (1860-1953) was part of the “Social Gospel Movement” in the late 1800s and early 1900s. An Anglican cleric, Donaldson rose to become Archdeacon of Westminster in London. He was an early member of the Christian Social Union and sat on the council of the Industrial Christian Fellowship. Donaldson led a march of unemployed workers from Leicester to London (1905) and led a group of clergy lobbying prime minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, demanding women’s suffrage (1913). A passionate advocate for peace, Donaldson served as the president of the London Council for the Prevention of War and as chairman of the League of Clergy for Peace (1931–40).

In a sermon delivered in Westminster Abbey (March 1925), Donaldson acknowledged “Seven Social Sins.” (Mahatma Gandhi would later publish this list in his newspaper *Young India*, thus ensuring a world-wide readership.) Donaldson classified these social concerns as moral issues or *sins*: wealth without work; pleasure without conscience; knowledge without character; commerce without morality; science without humanity; worship without sacrifice; politics without principle. Wealth, pleasure, knowledge, commerce, science, worship, and politics are not bad things; but when performed without concern for those who are helped or harmed by our actions, they are sinful. Such sins alienate us from God and one another.

God offers us an antidote for all our sins in Jesus Christ and through Christ-like living. Although we have blood on our hands, the stain of sin can be removed. The cure comes not from empty religious rituals or lackluster hymn-singing, stingy almsgiving, or unconscious communion-taking; this stuff bores God to tears. Clean hearts come when we stop doing bad things, start doing good things, and when we advocate for the powerless. By these things God is pleased with us, and we are “white as snow.”

Prayer: Grace-filled God, we thank You for the way You used Israel as an example to us of the importance of purifying our heart by doing what We pray that you would teach us your kingdom ways, that we might stop doing evil, start doing good, and always look to the welfare of the voiceless, the helpless, and the exploited. Help us to live in Christ-like ways, sacrificing ourselves for what we know is right, and in this way bring You honor and glory. We ask and pray this in the name of Jesus, who is our life and our salvation. Amen.

**Sources:**

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**The Need for Clean**

Sunday, August 7, 2022 [Isaiah 1:1, 10-20](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+1%3a1%2c+10-20&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In Shakespeare’s famous tragedy *MacBeth*, Lady Macbeth is observed sleepwalking by a serving-woman and a doctor. She paces up and down, in some agitation, rubbing her hands together as though washing them. “Out, damn spot!” she mutters to herself. The “spot” is a drop of blood belonging to the slain King Duncan. Lady Macbeth and her husband conspired to murder the King so Macbeth could assume the throne. Macbeth had stabbed Duncan with a knife. Lady Macbeth took the knife and planted it near the slumbering bodies of Duncan’s guards, whom she had caused to get drunk earlier in the evening. Then, Macbeth murdered the guards, ostensibly because he was angry at them for murdering the King. It was the perfect crime: *almost.* It is Lady Macbeth’s nocturnal handwashing that gives the game away.

No doubt, Lady MacBeth’s hands are perfectly clean as she paces the castle hallways. Surely, she scrubbed off any drops of blood the night of the murder before anyone was the wiser. But, in her fevered dreamworld, the drops of blood are still there, implicating her in the crime. No amount of washing will cleanse that kind of moral guilt.

We are obsessed with being clean. A hundred years ago, the charlady had a tub, washboard, and bar of soap. Kids in the 1940-1950s might remember helping their moms with the laundry by feeding the wet, clean clothes through the wringer, a device with two revolving rollers that squeezed every drop of moisture from the clothes. You did not use a bar of soap, but instead threw a cup of white soap powder into the churning water. Sometimes it had green flecks in it that did wonders with dirt. To get whites whiter, you added bleach. Today, we have all kinds of liquids and powders designed to get our colors brighter and our whites whiter. But what if what needs to be cleaned is our soul? What do we do if our spirit needs a good scrubbing? How do we wash our sins away?

**The Need for Clean.** God, speaking through Isaiah, has strong opinions about washing. God makes it abundantly clear that Israel is in dire need of a good scrubbing. God’s concerns take up the first six verses of the passage, which introduce the three themes of this prophecy: sin, the need for redemption, and the hope of a coming new kingdom.

God paints a grim picture in verses 10-15. Israel is compared to Sodom and Gomorrah, the sinful cities destroyed by God because of their corruption and faithlessness. As biblical