



# Highlights From the Book of Isaiah

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# A Critique of Pseudo-Piety (Isaiah 58:1-14)

- In today's text the word of God as spoken by the prophet Isaiah speaks to people who are very *religious* but are *dissatisfied* with *God's response* to their religious observances.
- Put bluntly, the religious behavior that is critiqued here looks more Canaanite pagan worship than it does God-honoring biblical worship.
- The essence of pagan religion was for the worshippers to pressure their gods to reward them for their good religious behavior.
- We see this kind of attitude reflected in verse 3, for example: *Why don't you notice when we fast? Why don't you pay attention when we humble ourselves?*

# A Critique of Pseudo-Piety (Isaiah 58:1-14)

- The Israelites prided themselves as a “*nation that does what is right*” (verse 2).
- But they were only *doing* what is “*right*” in hopes of *obligating* the LORD to give them what they wanted.
- And then they were *shocked and offended* when the LORD didn’t do their bidding!
- The essence of *true* God-honoring religion, however, is that of a *thankful response* to God:
  - Not doing things to *influence* the LORD but doing them to *obey* him
  - Not works looking for a *reward* but faith acting in *obedience*.

# A Critique of Pseudo-Piety (Isaiah 58:1-14)

- For this reason, Isaiah contrasts the *desperate fasting* in verses 2-3 with the *joyful Sabbath* keeping in verses 13-14.
- The *faithful* Israelite was so captivated by God that setting apart the Sabbath day for the worship of God was a *joy* to him.
- This is one reason for the emphasis on Sabbath keeping in chapters 56-66 – under the Old Covenant the Sabbath was the symbol of a whole life and heart devoted to the Lord.

# A Critique of Pseudo-Piety (Isaiah 58:1-14)

- Chapter 58 expresses many of the same ideas that we saw back when we looked at Isaiah 1:10-20:
  - *The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I do not want. When you enter my presence, do you actually think I want this— animals trampling on my courtyards? Do not bring any more meaningless offerings! (1:11-12)*
- In both of the these passages, it is the unholy alliance between outward religious adherence and personal shortcoming that is condemned and, in particular, the assumption that it is possible to be truly religious while remaining socially indifferent.
- One of the unique features of the Biblical faith is that there is no such thing as a genuine relationship with God when there is not at the same time a loving relationship with one's brother in the LORD.

# A Critique of Pseudo-Piety (Isaiah 58:1-14)

- I have divided today's text as follows:
  - Pseudo-Piety Condemned (58:1–5)
  - The Right Way to Fast (58:6–7)
  - The Blessings of Proper Fasting (58:8–9a)
  - Other Abuses to Put Aside (58:9b–10a)
  - Further Resultant Blessings (58:10b–12)
  - The Sabbath (58:13–14)

# Pseudo-Piety Condemned (58:1–5)

58:1 *“Shout loudly! Don’t be quiet! Yell as loudly as a trumpet! Confront my people with their rebellious deeds; confront Jacob’s family with their sin. <sup>2</sup> They seek me day after day; they want to know my requirements, like a nation that does what is right and does not reject the law of their God. They ask me for just decrees; they want to be near God. <sup>3</sup> They lament, ‘Why don’t you notice when we fast? Why don’t you pay attention when we humble ourselves?’ Look, at the same time you fast, you satisfy your selfish desires, you oppress your workers. <sup>4</sup> Look, your fasting is accompanied by arguments, brawls, and fistfights. Do not fast as you do today, trying to make your voice heard in heaven. <sup>5</sup> Is this really the kind of fasting I want? Do I want a day when people merely humble themselves, bowing their heads like a reed and stretching out on sackcloth and ashes? Is this really what you call a fast, a day that is pleasing to the LORD?”*

# Pseudo-Piety Condemned (58:1–5)

- The LORD exhorts Isaiah to “*Shout loudly!*” in declaring the sins of “*Jacob’s family*” (i.e. the nation of Israel).
- The call is *urgent and specific*, for the people are remarkably blind to their “*rebellious deeds*” and “*sins*”, which need to be cleansed.
- The prophet is to “*yell as loudly as a trumpet*” to grab the people’s attention and alert them to the need for *drastic action*.
- Verses 2–3a describe the religious activity of God’s people, who *claim* to
  - “*seek [God] day after day*”
  - “*want to know [God’s] requirements*”
  - “*[do] what is right... and not reject the law of their God*”
  - “*ask [God] for just decrees*”
  - “*want to be near God*”



# Pseudo-Piety Condemned (58:1–5)

- They're doing all this and yet God is not responsive.
- They *seem* eager to know the LORD's ways, but there is a lack of *genuineness* in their actions:
- When the people complain that God has not noticed or responded to their fasting, he points out that fasting has not changed their lives at all; it is merely empty ritual.
- As proof, he cites the fact that on fast days they “*satisfy [their] selfish desires*”, “*oppress [their] workers*”
- Instead of leading to humble repentance, their fast days resulted in “*arguments, brawls, and fistfights*”
- The LORD tells them plainly how objectionable their actions are: you cannot “*fast as you do today*” and expect “*your voice [to be] heard in heaven*”
- It is evident that they fasted in hopes of *manipulating* God instead of using it to align their hearts to his.

# Pseudo-Piety Condemned (58:1–5)

- Fasting that is calculated to get kudos from the Lord, is done for self-gratification at the expense of others, and brings out some of the worst elements in their behavior has no currency in heaven.
- The people of Isaiah 58 had ritualized the whole exercise of fasting into “*bowing their heads like a reed and stretching out on sackcloth and ashes*”.
- The phrase “*bowing their heads like a reed*” exposes the formalism of the whole exercise – it was as automatic and uncomprehending as a reed before a wind.
- Sackcloth is mentioned thirty-three times in the Bible as an expression of humility before the Lord (e.g. Neh 9: 1)
- But if fasting accompanied by the bowing of the head or wearing of sackcloth is offered in place of changed attitudes and behavior, God does not want fasting at all.

# The Right Way to Fast (58:6–7)

*58:6 No, this is the kind of fast I want: I want you to remove the sinful chains, to tear away the ropes of the burdensome yoke, to set free the oppressed, and to break every burdensome yoke. <sup>7</sup> I want you to share your food with the hungry and to provide shelter for homeless, oppressed people. When you see someone naked, clothe them! Don't turn your back on your own flesh and blood.*

# The Right Way to Fast (58:6–7)

- Here the LORD describes the kind of attitude and actions he *expects* to accompany their fasting.
- **True** fasting requires people to humble themselves inwardly and to outwardly and to demonstrate this humility by such things as:
  - “*removing the sinful chains*” of injustice (instead they are to treat others justly)
  - “*tearing away the ropes of the burdensome yoke*” (i.e. releasing those who have been unjustly burdened)
  - “*sharing [their] food with the hungry and providing shelter for homeless*” and clothes for those who have none
- Israel was to be an example to the other nations in the Ancient Near East and to demonstrate the kindness of its God.
- Self-denial for the sake of others is difficult and rare, but God expected it from his people (i.e. “*love your neighbor as yourself*”, Lev 19:18).

# The Blessings of Proper Fasting (58:8–9a)

<sup>8</sup> *Then your light will shine like the sunrise; your restoration will quickly arrive; your godly behavior will go before you, and the LORD's splendor will be your rear guard.* <sup>9a</sup>  
*Then you will call out, and the LORD will respond; you will cry out, and he will reply, 'Here I am.'*

# The Blessings of Proper Fasting (58:8–9a)

- If they will live out God's freedom in their relationships with one another, then the satisfaction that they have been seeking in their religion will be theirs.
- If we make that satisfaction an end in itself, trying to grasp it for ourselves, it will elude us.
- But if make **God** our focus through the just treatment of others, the LORD will bless us in ways we can't even imagine.
- Four elements are mentioned here: light, healing, guidance/ protection, and God's presence.
- When we choose to make ourselves, our religion, and the control of our destinies the focus of our lives, the result is darkness, disease, defeat, and separation.

# The Blessings of Proper Fasting (58:8–9a)

- Therefore it is not surprising that the benefits God offers are the antidotes to all of those maladies:
  - “*light*” will dispel our darkness like the “*sunrise*”.
  - “*restoration*” – i.e. healing, both physically and spiritually.
  - Before us will go our “*godly behavior*”, and behind, gathering up the stragglers, will come the “*the LORD’s splendor*”.
  - Above all, God himself will be present in response to the people’s prayers.

# The Blessings of Proper Fasting (58:8–9a)

- They had *seemingly* prayed *in vain* – God had not responded to their cries.
- But the reason was simple.
- They had been trying to *use* God while their behavior toward those weaker than themselves showed that they did not even *know* him.
- Why should he manifest his presence to such people?
- But to those who *truly* share his character, he is *abundantly* present.
- This is *ultimately* what true biblical religion is all about: the presence of God.
- It is not *primarily* a system of ideas or a system of ethics. It is the inbreaking of God into our lives, and that inbreaking will change all our attitudes and behavior.



# Other Abuses to Put Aside (58:9b–10a)

58:9b *You must remove the burdensome yoke from among you and stop pointing fingers and speaking sinfully.* 10a *You must actively help the hungry and feed the oppressed.*

# Other Abuses to Put Aside (58:9b–10a)

- The conditions for the blessing of God are restated here.
- Although fasting is not mentioned here *specifically*, it is clearly in view as we will see in verse 10.
- God’s concern is that the worshiper be delivered from a focus on himself and that true worship will grow out of a genuine caring for others.
- **Three** kinds of behavior are highlighted, with the first two being *negative* and the third *positive*.
- Negatively, the lovers of God should work at removing “*the burdensome yoke from among you*” – a reference to oppression of all sorts.
- But the second removal adds something new: “*stop pointing fingers and speaking sinfully*”.

# Other Abuses to Put Aside (58:9b–10a)

- Oppression of the poor and the weak will not stop ultimately until they are no longer seen as objects of scorn and contempt, or as pitiable victims.
- They must be seen as persons of worth and dignity, brothers and sisters under God.
- This important note is carried one step farther in v. 10a, where the *positive* element is brought into play.
- Now it is not something that must be *taken away*, but something that must be *added*.
- Here the allusion to fasting enters the picture again.
- The people whom Isaiah addresses think that an important way of showing devotion to God is to deprive oneself of food for his sake— to make oneself hungry.
- The prophet says God would much rather we show our devotion to him by alleviating hunger in others.
- The one act is primarily self-oriented and the other is primarily self-forgetful.

# Further Resultant Blessings (58:10b–12)

58:10b *Then your light will dispel the darkness, and your darkness will be transformed into noonday.* <sup>11</sup> *The LORD will continually lead you; he will feed you even in parched regions. He will give you renewed strength, and you will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring that continually produces water.* <sup>12</sup> *Your perpetual ruins will be rebuilt; you will reestablish the ancient foundations. You will be called, ‘The one who repairs broken walls, the one who makes the streets inhabitable again.’*

## Further Resultant Blessings (58:10b–12)

- The next two phrases, “*Then your light will dispel the darkness, and your darkness will be transformed into noonday*” (v. 10b), are a figurative reference to divine deliverance, of being rescued from fear and adversity, similar to Psalm 23:4 (“*Even when I must walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger*”).
- Verse 10b here corresponds closely to verses 7–8 with the same result of light conquering darkness and gloom being converted to midday light, meaning that God’s deliverance will guide and protect them, which is further described here in the next couple of verses.

## Further Resultant Blessings (58:10b–12)

- They will have assurance of God’s continual guidance (“*The LORD will continually lead you*”).
- God will provide for their needs (“*he will feed you even in parched regions*”) so abundantly that they will be “*like a well-watered garden, like a spring that continually produces water*”.
- The image of water, so vital to life in a land as dry as Israel, was a sign of blessing that would certainly have resonated with the people.
- God will give his strengthening power to transform and rejuvenate (“*Your perpetual ruins will be rebuilt*”).

## Further Resultant Blessings (58:10b–12)

- Notice it is God's people, not God himself, who are called: "*The one who repairs broken walls, the one who makes the streets inhabitable again.*"
- In the **original** context, this is a reference to Jerusalem and other cities that had been destroyed and would be rebuilt ("*you will reestablish the ancient foundations*").
- But as we have observed throughout this passage, this rebuilding of the ruined cities after the Babylonian exile prefigures the **ultimate** reestablishing of "*ancient foundations*" as the gospel goes throughout the world bringing men back to their Creator and Redeemer.

# The Sabbath (58:13–14)

58:13 *You must observe the Sabbath rather than doing anything you please on my holy day. You must look forward to the Sabbath and treat the LORD's holy day with respect. You must treat it with respect by refraining from your normal activities and by refraining from your selfish pursuits and from making business deals.* <sup>14</sup> *Then you will find joy in your relationship to the LORD, and I will give you great prosperity, and cause crops to grow on the land I gave to your ancestor Jacob." Know for certain that the LORD has spoken.*



# The Sabbath (58:13–14)

- The concluding statement highlights the importance of keeping the Sabbath, setting it apart to the LORD.
- Verse 13 makes it clear that to honor the Sabbath meant to refrain from doing what they pleased and instead do what honored God.
- Observing the Sabbath was to serve as a sign of the people's dedication to the LORD.
- There would have been little incentive to observe the Sabbath during the many long years of exile, so it is easy to see why they would need to be reminded to honor God this way.

# The Sabbath (58:13–14)

- Verse 14 explains that once the people learn to truly obey and honor God, they will experience genuine “*joy*” in the LORD.
- God tells them, “*I will give you great prosperity, and cause crops to grow on the land I gave to your ancestor Jacob*”.
- The latter two images picture a life that is blessed by God, enjoying the abundance of the land of Israel, as was promised to Jacob long ago (see Gen. 35:12).
- In the *first* part of this chapter the people made an *outward* show of delighting in God though their hearts were far from him.
- But now they know what *truly* delights the LORD.

# Next Time

- We will see how *Injustice Brings Alienation from God* (59:1-8)

# Class Discussion Time

- Our text today addresses a mindset that many people (including many Christians) have about how God views our worship and obedience of him – they will do certain things God commands and/or expects of them and then they, in turn, believe that God is therefore ***under obligation*** to reward them by answering their prayers or bringing some kind of special blessings into their life.
- Have you met people who have this kind of mindset?
- Have you ever found ***yourself*** thinking about your relationship with God in this way?

# Class Discussion Time

- Today's text emphasizes the importance of helping the poor among the people of God ("*your own flesh and blood*" verse 7).
- There is a **balancing** principle expressed in **other** passages of scripture that makes a distinction between:
  - Those who are poor due to circumstances beyond their control
  - Those who are poor because they are lazy and/or unwilling to work in order to provide for themselves.
- The scriptures are clear that we are **not** to help those who are in the second category:
  - *For even when we were with you, we used to give you this command: "If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat."* (2 Thes 3:10)

## Class Discussion Time

- What is the problem with helping someone who is ***able*** to provide for themselves, but is unwilling to do so (besides the fact that doing so would go against the command given by Paul in 2 Thes 3:10)?
- In other words, what do you think the ***underlying principle*** is behind the command given by the Apostle Paul?