

Living Right Over Empty Promises

Lesson for January 22, 2023

Unit II: God's Promises

Scriptural Background: Isaiah 58:1-14

Printed Text: Isaiah 58:6-10

Key verse: "... if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday." (Isaiah 58:10, NIV)

Word Study

He made free use of Christian vocabulary. He talked about the blessing of the Almighty and the Christian confessions which would become the pillars of the new government. He assumed the earnestness of a man weighed down by historic responsibility. He handed out pious stories to the press, especially to the church papers. He showed his tattered Bible and declared that he drew the strength for his great work from it as scores of pious people welcomed him as a man sent from God. Indeed, Adolf Hitler was a master of outward religiosity--with no inward reality!

Today in the Word, June 3, 1989.

In this week's lesson Israel is admonished against empty religious acts and called to true worship.

Key Terms

1. **Righteousness** (verse 8) – Acting in accord with divine or moral law; rightness; justice; what is right.
2. **Sackcloth** (verse 5) – Cloth made of black goats' hair, coarse, rough, and thick, used for sacks, and also worn by mourners; course, loose-fitting cloth; sacks.

Lesson Background

In the absence of God answering prayer, darkness is his only companion. Darkness pervades over the audience Isaiah addresses in Isaiah 58 for the very same reason. Their prayers have gone unanswered; God has been silent. Darkness is their only friend.

The historical backdrop for Isaiah 58 is likely the period of fasting that followed the exile. Zechariah 7:3-5 indicates that Israel fasted on the fifth and seventh months for seventy years following the destruction of Jerusalem. For seventy years Israel would fast at least twice a year commemorating the fact that they had lost their home and their king. They fasted and prayed seeking a response, an answer to their troubles.

This scenario matches the people's outcry in 58:3, "'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'" The people are clearly fasting in order for their prayers to be answered. The city of Jerusalem seems to be in ruins (58:12) and thus an exilic, or possibly postexilic situation is likely.

The people are desperately seeking justice from God. In Isaiah 58:2 God observes that "they ask of me righteous judgments." This term "righteous judgments" is a form of the words "justice" (*mispat*) and "righteousness" (*tsedaqah*), which feature prominently in the book of Isaiah.

Ever since Isaiah 40:27 Israel has been complaining, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right (*mispat*) is disregarded by my God." Israel believes a great injustice has been done to them by Babylon. They had been held captive by foreign oppressors. Their city is in ruins. Their temple is destroyed. They have been abandoned by God.

Israel complains that God has deprived them of justice. God responds by demanding Israel to stop depriving those around them of justice and righteousness! Even though Israel has been attentive to the ritual ordinances of the Law, they have completely neglected the ethical demands of it. The people believe they are the victims, when in fact they are the victimizers.

(Lim, Bo. Commentary on Isaiah. Workingpreacher.org)

I. Sow as Stated (Isaiah 58:6-7)

The people of Isaiah's day had the same problem as the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They were relying on their practice of the Mosaic rites to satisfy God. The true meaning of the rites had not affected their lives. God intended the system of worship that He prescribed to illustrate the importance of a heart relationship with Himself that should affect interpersonal relationships. They trusted in empty ritual, apart from the spiritual reality.

It isn't that Isaiah or the LORD are down on fasting. They are down on *any* empty religious ritual. The answer isn't to stop fasting, but to get right with God and make your fasting more than superficial. As Jesus said to His people about the empty religious rituals of the Pharisees, *These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone* (Matthew 23:23).

Real fasting – fasting that is partnered with real repentance and isn't only about image – has great power before God (Matthew 17:21). But God sees through the hypocrisy of empty religious ritual, including fasting. In Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, He told how the self-righteous Pharisee made a special point to say, "*I fast twice a week*" (Luke 18:9-14).

Fasting is an attempt to align one's priorities to the will of God. Isaiah is now calling for a fast, not from food, but from affluence, indifference, and privilege so that the community of faith might live in harmony with God, who "dwell[s] in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit" (Isaiah 57:15).

Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness: God tells His people, "If you want to fast the way that pleases Me, begin with getting right with your brothers and sisters. Stop oppressing others and reach out to help others."

To cease from oppressing others is not enough. To be a people of justice and righteousness means to be actively engaged in social and economic reform. Israel is to be an agent of liberation, generosity, and compassion for the poor and oppressed.

Loose the bonds of wickedness...undo the heavy burdens...let the oppressed go free...break every yoke: First, they had to *stop* acting wickedly towards others. This means that getting right with God *begins* by stopping the evil we do towards others.

Share your bread with the hungry...cover...not hide yourself from your own flesh: Then, they had to *start* acting lovingly towards others. This means that getting right with God *continues* by *doing* loving things for other people.

II. Reap the Rewards (Isaiah 58:8-10)

It is clear that the salvation God promises is conditioned upon the people's response. All the promises of Isaiah 58:8-9 are introduced by the word "then":

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and He will say, Here I am.

The promise in 58:10 comes in the form of an "If, then" clause:

If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, **then** your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness: Again, the LORD gives them three things to *stop* doing.

- They must stop oppressing others, treating them as animals bound with a **yoke**.
- They must *stop* **pointing...the finger** at others and see where they are to blame.
- They must *stop* **speaking wickedness**.

If you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul: Again, the LORD gives them two things to *start* doing. They needed to minister to the hungry with more than food; they had to **extend their soul to the hungry**. They had to look for the *afflicted soul* and seek to *satisfy* it.

Failing to do these are sins of *omission*. They are things that we should have done, yet we have not. If we will walk right with God, we must open our eyes and do what is our loving duty before Him.

This conditional emphasis is an extension of the fundamental principle expressed earlier in 56:1: "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed."

Isaiah 58:8-10 promise that light will break forth and healing will appear. In the book of Isaiah, light is a symbol for salvation:

- “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2).
- “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you” (Isaiah 60:1-2).

The light is none other than the Lord himself, who comes to liberate his people from darkness and establish a just and righteous kingdom.

Those who pour out themselves for the sake of justice and righteousness need not fear darkness or abandonment. The opposite is the case. It is to them the light of God’s salvation will shine.

Lesson Summary

This is a powerful and important passage. The prophet notes that the people of Israel are complaining that even though they fast and sacrifice and obey all the rules of pleasing God, their condition does not improve. The response of the Lord—again through the prophet—is basically that they are hypocrites. They are religiously observant, but only in hopes of selfish and material gain. What we have here, is the message that Jesus is later to develop and deliver with great passion. It's not what we do that matters, but why we're doing it. Selfish actions—even fasts and sacrifices made for negative, selfish reasons—simply create negative, selfish lives. There is no spiritual good because there was no spiritual good in the initial intention. If we want our lives to express love and abundance, we must make that intention our purpose.

So, these are realities in the world around us. In the city where I live, in the city where you live, there are hungry. In the country where we live, there are people enslaved and oppressed. And then in the world around us, there’s massive hunger, massive slavery, oppression. So, what are we doing as God’s people about that? God help us, God help us, we pray. Forgive us for our tendency. Just like the people in Isaiah’s day. God forgive us for our tendency to go through religious motions and to ignore massive, urgent physical, social, spiritual needs around us.

God calls us not merely to go through religious routines, but to show justice and mercy to those in need. "Loose the bonds of injustice," "share your bread with the hungry," "bring the homeless poor into your house"—Jesus later reiterates all these imperatives, and they are as urgent today as then. Verses eight through 10 contain the promise that if we choose to act from love and spiritual purpose, the result will be returned to us as light, healing, glory, and divine support in all things.