

Isaiah 58 • True Observance

Introduction

There are many rituals and practices that are unique to religion in general and Christianity in particular: the Sabbath, prayer, fasting, sacrifices, offerings, etc. One of the universal human behaviors is based on thinking that following the outward rituals peculiar to these practices is, in and of itself, enough. God—Who sees and judges not just appearances but a man's thoughts and heart—teaches that such motions are **NOT** enough. In observing others' behavior while they're engaged in these practices, we might take the stance, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck." However, God's point of view is, "It can do all that but if it doesn't have the heart of a duck, it's a phony." Does attending church make one a Christian without their having to act, believe, and live a changed life from the heart?

Observation

It's important to note the historical context of chapter 58. Based on v.12 it's most likely that Isaiah is speaking to those of the northern kingdom of Israel who are in exile. This is important to keep in mind in order to properly interpret the contextual meaning, and for a special observation of this teaching provided at the end of this study.

¹"Cry loudly, do not hold back;
Raise your voice like a trumpet,
And declare to My people their
transgression
And to the house of Jacob their sins.
²Yet they seek Me day by day and delight
to know My ways,
As a nation that has done righteousness
And has not forsaken the ordinance of
their God.
They ask Me for just decisions,
They delight in the nearness of God.

[Read v.1-2]

Q: Given that this is referencing people in exile, what is the meaning of this behavior? Is this indicating that these people are now in a right relationship and attitude with God?

A: They are earnestly—and most likely even sincerely—incessantly appealing to God to know when His judgment will come to an end. It's very good that they've learned some of the right lessons from what has happened to them, but they still have a way to go to complete the work which God began.

Application: Even after we acknowledge and submit to God's sovereignty, what is still left for us to do to be completely reconciled to Him? We must put His ways into practice and allow them to change forever our behavior going forward. Do you know someone that earnestly believes in God and may even desire to be close to Him, yet they continue to live as they did before?

³"Why have we fasted and You do not
see?
Why have we humbled ourselves and
You do not notice?
Behold, on the day of your fast you find
your desire,
And drive hard all your workers.
⁴Behold, you fast for contention and strife
and to strike with a wicked fist.
You do not fast like you do today to make
your voice heard on high.
⁵Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day
for a man to humble himself?
Is it for bowing one's head like a reed
And for spreading out sackcloth and
ashes as a bed?
Will you call this a fast, even an
acceptable day to the LORD?

[Read v.3-5]

Q: What does God identify as the basic troubling issue?

A: He is displeased with people who fast as an outward sign but whose heart and life betrays a false sincerity.

Q: What are the specific behaviors in v.3-4 God points to as evidence of their hypocrisy?

1. "...you find your desire..." (v.3)
2. "...drive hard all your workers..." (v.3)
3. "...fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist." (v.4)
4. "...you do not fast...to make your voice heard on high." (v.4)

It boils down to acting out of self-interest and with no regard for others.

Q: What is God describing in v.5?

A: They make a great show of their actions to be noticed by men rather than from a contrite heart to be noticed by God.

⁹And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

¹³“But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

¹⁴“I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

⁶Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to divide your bread with the
hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the
house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own
flesh?

⁸Then your light will break out like the
dawn,
And your recovery will speedily spring
forth;
And your righteousness will go before
you;

The glory of the LORD will be your rear
guard.

⁹Then you will call, and the LORD will
answer;

You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I
am.’
If you remove the yoke from your midst,
The pointing of the finger and speaking
wickedness,

¹⁰And if you give yourself to the hungry
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness
And your gloom will become like
midday.

¹¹And the LORD will continually guide
you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched
places,

[Read Luke 18:9-14]

Q: What is Jesus’ point?

A: It’s the difference between someone who exalts their self before men rather than humbling their self before God.

Application:

- *What is the application for us in these examples?*
- *Are we more like the Pharisee or the tax collector?*
- *Are we ever concerned and want to ensure that others see us in spiritual situations?*
- *What does that actually achieve for us?*
- *How does this provide the right or wrong kind of witness to non-believers that see us?*
- *How should we approach church activities in the presence of others?*

[Read v.6-12]

Q: What is the overall teaching being conveyed?

A: God is providing the example of someone that fasts properly before Him.

Q: What appears to be the first step in the process?

A: We must be loving our neighbors as our self.

1. *“...break every yoke...” (v.6)*
2. *“...divide your bread with the hungry...” (v.7)*
3. *“...bring the homeless poor into the house...” (v.7)*
4. *“When you see the naked, to cover him...” (v.7)*
5. *“...remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing finger and speaking wickedness...” (v.9)*
6. *“...give yourself to the hungry...” (v.10)*
7. *“...satisfy the desire of the afflicted.” (v.10)*

Q, What appears to be the next step in v.8-9?

A: Having shown God our love for our neighbor, He will both answer us and prepare the way before us.

1. *“...your light will break out...” (v.8)*
2. *“...your recovery will speedily spring forth...” (v.8)*
3. *“...your righteousness will go before you...” (v.8)*
4. *“...The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.” (v.8)*
5. *“...you will call, and the LORD will answer...” (v.9)*
6. *“...you will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’” (v.9)*

Q: What follows next in v.10-11?

A: Then our life will be replenished—transformed—as from a desert to a garden or darkness to light. (See Rom. 12:1-2)

1. *“...your light will rise in darkness...” (v.10)*
2. *“...your gloom will become midday...” (v.10)*
3. *“...the LORD will continually guide you...” (v.11)*
4. *“...satisfy our desire in scorched places...” (v.11)*
5. *“...give strength to your bones...” (v.11)*

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And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters
do not fail.

¹²Those from among you will rebuild the
ancient ruins;
You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the
breach,
The restorer of the streets in which to
dwell.

6. "...a watered garden..." (v.11)
7. "...a spring of water..." (v.11)

Q: What will be the final result according to v.12?

A: We will become a builder and repairer—an active participant in His kingdom, not a passive one.

1. "...you will rebuild..."
2. "...you will raise up..."
3. "...called the repairer of the breach..."
4. "...restorer of the streets..."

Point: Note the overall pattern:

1. Love our neighbor as our self.
2. Our way is prepared by the Lord.
3. Our life is replenished and transformed.
4. We in turn become a repairer, a restorer.

Application: If your service—your observance of God's things such as fasting—is not producing these results in your life, what does that indicate? What do you need to do?

Observation

There is more than one application of this passage for becoming a restorer:

1. Literally, Israel will become the nation it was supposed to be and complete its work of God's restoration of all mankind to Him.
2. Believers will carry on God's work to bring people into the proper relationship with Him and His church to where it should be.
3. There can be spiritual recovery for those who have sinned/backslidden.

[Read v.13-14]

¹³"If because of the sabbath, you turn
your foot
From doing your own pleasure on My
holy day,
And call the sabbath a delight, the holy
day of the LORD honorable,
And honor it, desisting from your own
ways,

From seeking your own pleasure
And speaking your own word,

¹⁴Then you will take delight in the LORD,
And I will make you ride on the heights
of the earth;
And I will feed you with the heritage of
Jacob your father,
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Q: What is the proper way to treat the sabbath?

A: To deny one's self and genuinely and sincerely seek Him. It's the contrast of "your own pleasure" and "your own ways" to "turn your foot" and "call the sabbath a delight".

Q: According to v.14, to whom is the heritage of God's promises through Jacob assured?

A: Those who act from the heart, not culture or outward ritual.

Application: Do we fashion our church experience to suit ourselves or do we come denying self in order to seek and honor Him alone?

Point: In both the examples of fasting and observing the sabbath, the subtle message is, "Your Redeemer is not hiding; He's here right now. But your self-centeredness prevents you from experiencing Him."

Observation

Q: If the people are trying to show compliance with Old Testament Law, what is missing? Why is the discussion here limited to just fasting and the sabbath?

A: What is missing is compliance with the sacrifices and all the service connected to the temple. This goes back to the opening observation that the context of this chapter is speaking of a people in exile. There is no temple for them. Therefore they can't obey the **WHOLE** Law but only the those things available to exiles such as fasting and the sabbath.

Q: But aren't the sacrifices the centerpiece of the Law? Why does God not even mention the fact that they're unable to make the sacrifices?

A: As God has repeatedly taught through His Word and prophets, it's not sacrifices He desires but a right and contrite heart. If He were a strict stickler for the rules, He would openly laugh at their pathetic attempts to keep part of the Law; but instead He proves that the condition of the heart is the most important thing by demanding they be sincere in the few things they're able to keep. It places the sacrifices in the right perspective as well as all observances.

Overall Application

- *How do you approach and engage the things of God? Is it for your own benefit, to gain esteem from others, or is it truly dedicated to God?*
- *Have you or someone you've known become obsessed with the details, structure, schedule or other facets of a church service or its meetings? Was it because you/they were concerned more for man or for God? How do battles over such details affect the rest of the body?*
- *Is your approach to God's things resulting in changes in your life? Are you engaged in rebuilding and restoring or making your own stand?*
- *Do you see your treatment and ministry to others as a requirement—even a natural extension—of the course of properly observing the things of God?*