

THE PRACTICE OF TRUE RELIGION

58 Shout aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their transgressions; [declare] to the house of Jacob their sins. ²Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, like a nation that practices righteousness and has not forsaken the commandments of their God. They ask me for righteous judgments; they delight in drawing near to God.

³[They ask,] Why have we fasted, but you have not taken notice of it? Why have we afflicted our soul, but you do not acknowledge it? Look, on the day of your fast you conduct your business and you exploit all of your laborers. ⁴Look, as you fast you are contending and quarreling [with one another], and even striking each other maliciously with your fists. [At present] you are not fasting in a way that will cause your voice to be heard on high. ⁵Is this the kind of fast that I desire—a day for a man to afflict his soul; [a day for a man] to bow his head like a reed and to spread out sackcloth and ashes for a bed? Will you call this a fast, a day that is acceptable to Jehovah? ⁶Is not this the kind of fast I desire, [namely, to cut loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set free the oppressed and break every yoke [of bondage]? ⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house? [Is it not] to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to turn away from [helping] your own flesh and blood?

⁸[If you do these things] then your light will break forth like the day, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of Jehovah will be your rearguard. ⁹Then you will call and Jehovah will answer; you will cry for help, and he will answer, Here I am! If you do away with the yoke of oppression, [if you stop threateningly] pointing the finger and uttering malicious threats, ¹⁰if you have compassion for the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like noonday. ¹¹Then Jehovah will continually guide you; he will satisfy your soul [even] in a sun-scorched land and give strength to your bones. You will be like a well-watered garden and like a spring of water that never runs dry. ¹²Your children will rebuild the ancient ruins and will re-construct the age-old foundations. You will be called, The Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets in which to Dwell.

¹³If, to avoid breaking the Sabbath, you keep your feet from going about your business on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight—the holy day of Jehovah honorable; if you will, [indeed,] honor it—not going your own way, or conducting your own business, or conversing [about business] matters; ¹⁴then you will find your joy in Jehovah; and I will cause you to ride upon the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. [This will surely be the case,] because the mouth of Jehovah has spoken it. (Isa. 58:1-14)

Introduction

Suppose we are gathered in the sanctuary for worship one Sunday morning. You have barely managed to crawl out of bed to get to church because you had been out carousing until the wee hours of the morning, but somehow you manage to get here. You have been screaming at your wife all the while you have been putting on your

Sunday suit, and the children have been fighting with each other all the way to church, but somehow you manage to walk into the sanctuary hand in hand with polite smiles on your faces and your children in tow.

As you backed out of the garage, under your breath you cursed the newspaper delivery boy for carelessly throwing the Sunday paper in the driveway. While driving down the street you made an obscene gesture at a motorist who thoughtlessly pulled out in front of you. In the church parking lot you avoided old Mr. Smith to whom you have not spoken ever since he cheated you in a business deal ten years ago. But now you have a warm handshake for the greeters at the door.

As the organist plays the opening prelude, in your mind you replay last night's ballgame, play by play, all the while your head is reverently bowed and your face displays an expression of pious solitude. Now the pastor steps forward to announce the opening hymn, now we all stand to sing, and now, at this very moment, the Lord Jesus physically appears at the back of the sanctuary: STOP THE MUSIC! He shouts. DO YOU CALL THIS WORSHIP!?! DO YOU CALL THIS RELGION!?! Then He walks to the front of the sanctuary and steps to the pulpit. Now He opens the Bible to Isaiah 58 and based upon that passage declares, "True religion does not consist in the outward observance of religious formalities, but in the sincere observance of the commandments of the LORD your God."

Let us give heed to what our Lord has to say to us from Isaiah 58 about The Practice of True Religion.

I. True Religion Consists of More than Mere Religious Formalities (Isa. 58:1-5)

Isaiah 58 confronts us with a paradoxical situation: the people of Israel are gathered together for worship, but the prophet of the LORD is commanded to rebuke them in the strongest terms. The LORD commands Isaiah, "*Shout aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their transgressions; declare to the house of Jacob their sins.*"

Verse 2 reveals the condition that is displeasing to the LORD and meets with His stern rebuke. There is the outward appearance of godliness, even accompanied by a deep display of interest in spiritual things. The LORD acknowledges, "*they seek me daily*"—here is the diligence observance of the outward forms of worship. "*[They] delight to know my ways*"—here is a desire to hear the Word of God expounded and explained. "*They ask me for righteous judgments*"—here is a desire to know the truth of God and even how it applies to life. "*They delight in drawing near to God*"—here is a desire and even the enjoyment of being in the presence of God. But all of this is divorced from a life of obedience. God's criticism and chastisement of the people results from the fact that they are not practicing righteousness in their lives; on the contrary, they are forsaking the law of God in their daily living.

In verse 3 these bewildered worshipers raise the question, "Why is it that the LORD does not acknowledge our fasting (or our worship)?" It appears that, perhaps in the face of the economic and military crisis they faced, there had gone out the call for a national day of fasting, (similar to what is described in Judges 2:24-26,

Then the Israelites drew near to Benjamin the second day. ²⁵This time, when the Benjamites came out from Gibeah to oppose them, they slaughtered another eighteen thousand Israelites, all of them armed with swords. ²⁶Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before Jehovah. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to Jehovah. (Judg. 20:24-26)

The nation has responded to the call for a national day of prayer and fasting, and have done so with earnestness: "*we have afflicted our soul*" (vs. 3.) But there has been no response from God: no relief, no healing of their land, and no dispersing of the enemy. Now the people were asking, 'Why not?'

In verses 3b-4 the LORD explains: "*Look, on the day of your fast you conduct your business and you exploit all of your laborers.*" Even as they engaged in sincere religious worship they were disregarding the commandments of God; they were doing as they pleased rather than what God commanded, one example being the unrighteous way in which they treated those who labored for them. By way of illustration: in the old T.V. movie *Roots*, in one scene the plantation owner is seen piously and devotedly reading his Bible while his slaves are being beaten and exploited. The Apostle James (5:4-5) presents a severe warning to employers not to exploit their employees as a means of gaining for themselves a measure of the "good life" at the expense of those laborers; he warns against getting the most out of them, giving the least to them, so that the owner can get rich at their expense:

Behold! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. (Jas. 5:4-5)

The LORD continues to bring charges against the way in which His people are worshiping, "*Look, as you fast you are contending and quarreling [with one another], and even striking each other maliciously with your fists.*" Even as they sincerely engaged in acts of religious worship, they were at odds with one another. They were in conflict with one another; they were at enmity with one another and harbored bitterness towards one another; they bore grudges against one another and refused to be reconciled. We must take very seriously the words of our Lord Jesus Christ when He says, "*if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins*" (Matt. 6:14-15.) Also, the Apostle Paul admonishes the church,

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col. 3:12-14)

In the latter part of verse 4 the LORD sums up their present condition by stating: “[At present] you are not fasting in a way that will cause your voice to be heard on high.” He goes on to inquire, “Is this the kind of fast that I desire—a day for a man to afflict his soul, [a day for a man] to bow his head like a reed and to spread out sackcloth and ashes for a bed? Will you call this a fast, a day that is acceptable to Jehovah?” The LORD makes clear that He does not consider the mere offering of the formalities of religious observance—no matter how sincerely they may be offered—as acceptable worship, if they are not accompanied by obedience in all areas of life.

Are we practicing true religion? Or does our religion consist of mere formalities, however sincere those formalities may be? If we are a saint in matters of worship, but a practical infidel in matters of everyday life, our religion is not acceptable to God; on the contrary, it meets with His stern rebuke:

Does Jehovah delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams; ²³for rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. (1 Sam. 15:22-23a)

II. True Religion Involves the Observance of God's Commandments (Isa. 58:6-10,13)

What is the kind of religion that is acceptable to God and pleasing to Him? According to verse 6, true religion involves the practice of justice in our dealings with our fellow man. The picture presented in Isaiah 58:6 is that of a man (or a class or race of people) held captive by injustice; they are enslaved by a system that oppresses them and denies them equal opportunity. It appears to be much the same as the situation outlined in Jeremiah 34:13-16,

This is what Jehovah, the God of Israel, says: I made a covenant with your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I said, ¹⁴Every seventh year each of you must free any fellow Hebrew who has sold himself to you. After he has served you six years, you must let him go free. Your fathers, however, did not listen to me or pay attention to me. ¹⁵Recently you repented and did what is right in my sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to his countrymen. You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name. ¹⁶But now you have turned around and profaned my name; each of you has taken back the male and female servants you had set free to go where

they wished. You have forced them to become your servants again. (Jer. 34:13-16)

The people of Israel had abused the laws dealing with indentured servitude, making it impossible for a man to escape that condition and advance in the society. In contemporary terms, it would be the equivalent of making entry level and “dead end” jobs available to certain classes or races of people, but denying them the open opportunity for economic and social advancement—the way being barred by a convenient legal apparatus controlled by those who possess the wealth and power and are determined to keep it as their own special domain.

The Word of God defines injustice and oppression in these terms: The gaining of wealth by exploiting other men and/or preventing them from having an equal opportunity to gain wealth for themselves. As Christians, we need to be sensitive to acts of injustice and be indignant against such acts and practices. We need to oppose such acts and practices in the name of Christ; and God forbid that we should ourselves engage in such acts or support them. We must take seriously and put into practice the admonitions of the prophets of the LORD:

These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; ¹⁷do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this, declares Jehovah. (Zech. 8:16-17)

He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? [He requires that] you act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God. (Mic. 6:8)

According to verse 7, true religion involves the practice of mercy towards our fellow man: *“Is it not to share your food with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house? [Is it not] to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to turn away from helping your own flesh and blood?”* The LORD declares that this is the kind of fasting and worship He desires. According to verse 10 we are to “have compassion for the hungry.” In Jesus’ parable, the Good Samaritan is moved with compassion when he comes upon the man who was stripped and beaten by robbers—it was his compassion that moved him to come to the man’s aid:

*But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him [i.e.; the man who had been beaten by robbers], **he was moved with compassion,** ³⁴and came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on them oil and wine; and he set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.* (Lk. 10: 33-34)

May the LORD help us to look upon those in need with godly compassion, instead of looking upon them with contempt or fear. The instruction of Ephesians 4:28 is to have a portion of our income available for the purpose of helping those in need: *“He who has been stealing must no longer steal; rather, let him labor, doing honorable work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with the one who is in need.”* Note that the Ephesians passage is speaking about a whole change of outlook and attitude; an attitude that shows tangible concern for those in need, as opposed to the old sinful attitude that put one’s self first and sought opportunity to exploit others—the attitude of the thief is to give way to the attitude of Christ-like compassion.

Then, according to verse 13, true religion involves honoring the Lord’s Day:

If, to avoid breaking the Sabbath, you keep your feet from going about your business on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight—the holy day of Jehovah honorable; if you will, indeed, honor it—not going your own way, or conducting your own business, or conversing about business matters ... (Isa. 58:13)

The Hebrew word, *שְׂעוּלָה*, rendered “pleasure” in the A.S.V. also has the meaning “business,” which is the preferable meaning in this present passage. Taking the word in the sense of “business” would cause the Hebrew phrase, which literally reads, *“speaking your own words,”* to be understood as a reference to pursuing business negotiations or conversing on the topic of business on the LORD’s holy Sabbath. The commentary of Jeremiah 17:21-22 confirms this interpretation:

This is what Jehovah says: Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. ²²Do not bring a load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers. (Jer. 17:21-22)

Old Testament Israel was commanded as the holy nation to sanctify the Sabbath by refraining from their normal course of business on that day—it was meant to be a covenantal sign of their devotion to the LORD their God and the testimony that He occupied the place of first priority in their lives. As New Testament Christians we are to honor the LORD by honoring His day—gathering for corporate worship on the Lord’s Day and abstaining from our everyday business affairs.

Are we practicing true religion? Doing so by observing the commandments of the LORD our God? We must take to heart the rebuke the Lord Jesus issued against the Pharisees of His day:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more

important matters of the law—justice, mercy and integrity. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. (Matt. 23:23)

According to the Apostle James, *“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (Jas. 1:27)*

Conclusion

What benefits and blessings does the LORD confer upon those who practice true religion?

Isaiah 58:8 lists the following national (as they pertained to the Old Testament theocracy) and community (as they pertain to the New Testament church’s congregations) blessings as these: *“Your light will break forth like the day”* (vs. 8a.) The favor of the LORD will shine upon the nation (or the community), lifting it to a position of honor and prominence; with regard to the Old Testament form of this blessing, note Deuteronomy 28:1-6,

If you fully obey Jehovah your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, Jehovah your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. ²All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey Jehovah your God: ³You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. ⁴The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. ⁵Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. ⁶You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out. (Deut. 28:1-6)

Another blessing enumerated in Isaiah 58 is the LORD’s promise, *“your healing will quickly appear.”* Just as wounded flesh is restored to health, so will that nation or community be restored to wholeness—that is to say, it will experience the life and blessing of moral and spiritual soundness. The LORD further promises, *“your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of Jehovah will be your rearguard.”* The Old Testament theocratic nation, would enjoy the benefit of the invincible strength of righteousness and the guardian presence of the LORD, note Deuteronomy 11:8a, 25,

Observe therefore all the commandments I am giving you today, so that you may have ... strength ... ²⁵No man will be able to stand against you. Jehovah your God, as he promised you, will put the terror and fear of you on the whole land, wherever you go. (Deut. 11:8a, 25)

For the New Testament church community, this promise would translate into the assurance of the LORD’s sustaining presence, even in the most difficult of times and situations.

The passage also lists a number of personal blessings, to be enjoyed by the believer in his relationship with the LORD. The first of which is the promise, *“Then you will call and Jehovah will answer”* (vs. 9.) The result of the practice of true religion is true communion and fellowship with Christ and with God His Father, note John 14:23, *“Jesus responded to him by saying, ‘If a man loves me, he will obey my teaching; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and live with him.’”* Then there is the promise, *“Your children will rebuild the ancient ruins and will re-construct the age-old foundations”* (vs.12a.) That is to say, your life becomes a testimony and a benefit to succeeding generations, and you will have the pleasure of seeing them walking in the truth. As covenant faithfulness is lived out and passed on to succeeding generations, and they in turn receive Christ, abide in Him and adhere to His commandments, there is the continued experience of God’s covenant faithfulness in blessing. Finally, there is the promise, *“You will be called, The Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets in which to Dwell”* (vs. 12b.) In New Testament terms, this promise translates into the assurance that you will have the honor and distinction of being one of those who maintains and restores the integrity and the witness of the church at a time when it is collapsing into conformity with the sinful world around it.

In verses 9b-10a the LORD reiterates the elements of true religion—what it truly means to live out the Christian life. Remove the yoke of oppression. Do away with the pointing of the finger and speaking maliciously—i.e.; angry accusations and threats of vengeance. Have compassion on the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul.