

Lesson 26 “Hypocrisy Exposed – Help Extended”  
Isaiah 58 – 59

Last week the lesson revealed the Savior’s message to leaders and idolaters, and to the prideful and the greedy. God, the Lord, is the high and lofty One. There is no hope or future in pursuing our own self-interests and the lusts of the flesh.

This week’s lesson transitions from the aforementioned types of ungodly behavior to another . . . the sin of hypocrisy. Religious hypocrisy with its phony behavior was particularly abhorrent to God. He condemned their self-directed wicked behavior and their wanton disregard for what He really desired.

Before we start our lecture, I must admit that I have been a hypocrite more than I would like to admit. As one hears in the various 12 step meetings, my inside and my outside did not match. As a result, there is a tension that can grow like a monster to the point that it is literally eating all my joy and abundant life from my innermost being.

Chapter 58, verse 1, states: “Cry or shout aloud.” There is a sense of urgency. The message is clearly important. Do not whitewash these words or lessen their severity of the situation. The situation is this: The people, God’s people, are in rebellion against Him. Matthew Henry comments, “Do we make light of that which brings down the wrath of God?” God is demonstrating His love and concern for them by calling attention to their sins. Do not be fooled. As Romans 3:23 tells us, “We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

In verse 2, the apparent case is made that they are eagerly seeking the face of God and knowledge of His ways. The NIV translation places a clause “as if.” “As if” implies that there is only an appearance of seeking God and His holiness. What determines if God is pleased is the motive behind the action. Charles Swindoll makes a very apt statement: “God is impressed not with noise or size or wealth, but with quite things . . . things done in secret, the inner motives, the true condition of the heart.”

“What?” the people respond with indignation. We’ve done what you asked and you, God, did not notice. Furthermore, we have humbled ourselves. Isn’t it amazing that they did not see the inconsistency between telling God, “You did not notice us,” and in the next breath proclaiming they had humbled themselves?

Thomas Brooks in 1655 made this observation: “God is on high, and yet the higher a man lifts himself up, the farther he is from God; and the lower a man humbles himself, the nearer he is to God.”

Hypocrisy is a condemnation often leveled at the church or Christians. What cancer is to the body, hypocrisy is to the body of Christ. It’s addictive and a killing agent. Jesus reserved His most severe words of condemnation for the hypocrite, yet many still seem to prefer that lifestyle to truth and authenticity. We want to look good to others. But God knows our hearts just as he knew the hearts of the people in Isaiah’s day.

Fasting was an important element in traditional Jewish worship. In my early years in the church, fasting was mentioned only occasionally from the pulpit but never supported as a spiritual practice for the entire body. Perhaps this has been the same for you. One person who did extensive research did not find any book published regards fasting from 1861 to 1954. But the Scriptures have much to say regarding the subject.

Here's just a small list of Bible men and women who have fasted: Moses, Anna, David, Esther, Elijah, Daniel, Paul and Jesus. Perhaps the reason for the disregard of fasting today is a bad reputation regarding the ascetic practices and the perception of it being primarily a Jewish custom.

In the Old Testament God commanded only one fast, the Day of Atonement. To fast was to "afflict one's soul." There were other fasts usually revolving around personal need. They fasted in war, when loved ones were sick or died, or when they sought God's forgiveness; i.e. Moses fasting for 40 days for the sins of Israel.

The purpose of fasting was to afflict and chasten the soul so as to humble it. The nature of the fast was to abstain from all food, but not water, for a range of one to seven days. One had to make certain that the fast was not degraded to an external show or ritual.

Clearly, these Jews were not participating in the true significance of the fast. God knew that their ceremony and activities were devoid of humility and were rather a means to a selfish end. The workers had to report to work on fast days and additionally were exploited. The fast days degraded into quarrels and physical violence. How could they expect their voices to be heard? They came with a preconceived plan and wanted a blessing from God. The Jews thought a fast consisted primarily of bowing one's head, and heaping ashes on it or wearing sackcloth to represent their grief. Unfortunately, their motives were less than holy.

In essence, God was saying to them: "You call that a fast? I don't think so!" The fasting that God desires is very purposeful and borne out of humility and true repentance. The true fast was composed of actions that spoke louder than empty words or actions.

The Jews needed to stop acting wickedly toward others. They needed to loose the bonds of injustice and wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, let the oppressed go free, and break every binding yoke. Then they needed to act lovingly. How? They needed to share bread with the hungry, provide the homeless with shelter, cover those without clothing, and not turn away from your own flesh and blood. James 1:17 reminds us that the religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after widows and orphans in their distress. Paul writing in 1 Timothy 5:8 says, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

Verses 6 – 7 contain three conditional clauses: if you do this then I will do that. If you stop acting wickedly and start acting lovingly, then the following will result: One would go from self-produced darkness to God produced light.

Look at the references: your light will dawn in the darkness; your darkness will be as noonday. They would have lives of righteousness, love and answered prayer. This progression of righteousness, love and answered prayer is not just a happenstance – this is the order that must be followed. We are reminded in 2 Chronicles 7:14, “If my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves (drop hypocrisy and the masks) and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways (repentance and actions) then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

In Isaiah 58:8-12 we’re told that our healing will break forth speedily, that righteousness will go before me and the glory of the Lord will be my rear guard. What a blessing! Our Lord is very present. I can cry, “Lord,” and He will say, “Here I am.”

Ray Ortland’s commentary on Isaiah stated on this passage, “Do you want God to answer your prayers? Be His answer to someone else’s prayers. Do you want God to come in His immediacy and say to you “Here I am?” Get close to someone who needs you and say, “Here I am.”

The second conditional clause relates to the following: If you take the yoke of oppression from your midst; if you take away pointing the finger of blame that refuses to look at your own part in this; if you quit spreading rumors that tear away at the spirit of others; and if you pour yourself out to the hungry and satisfy the desired of the afflicted, then . . . then what?

The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones, make you like a watered garden, and a spring of water that never fails. Furthermore, you will build the old waste places, raise up foundations of many generations, and be called the Repairers of the breach (or broken walls) and the Restorer of streets with dwellings.

What is that section of Scripture really saying? God is promising blessings to the repentant. God will be your constant guide. This is a promise to those that practice their faith with sincere hearts and actions. We are promised health and life in our soul. God has also promised us that if we serve Him, He will give us the capacity to build in the waste places foundations that are built on the Rock – the Solid Rock – that will endure forever. We can repair the breach between men and God, between our country and God because we have the truth of the gospel.

Alan Redpath reminds us of this truth: “There needs to be a rebuilding work today. We live in a broken world. In every direction there are broken homes and broken hearts, and that which was once sacred is but a waste place. There was once a carefully guarded fence around the sacredness of life, family life, sex life, and the right to personal privacy, but now we have just a waste place.”

This passage leaves us with the reminder of God’s desire for obedience. Do it God’s way and it is an enlightened, guided, satisfied, fragrant, freshly sustained, productive and joyful experience.

The final conditional clause is in vs. 13-14. God is concerned that we do not turn away or abandon the Sabbath. It's of such importance that it's one of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20:8. The Sabbath was a feast day, not a fast day. It's a day to be set aside and abstain from all labor and improper activities. Isaiah approaches the Sabbath from a series of "no's" but for good reason. He knows that God desires that the day be very special and not just another day of the week that is tyrannized by all our thoughts of "I ought to," "I should do," "I'd better go" . . . but rather a whole day devoted to God, family and true rest.

The Sabbath for the Jews was to be a time of remembrance and observation. Deuteronomy 5:15 tells of Moses' reiteration that the Jews were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord, your God, brought you forth from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord, your God, commands you to observe the Sabbath day.

God wanted us to rest but also to honor Him. In so doing you will find delight. In a practical sense, how can I delight in Him if I can't take the time to talk with Him regularly? Delight in God is a real treasure. If you find inexpressible joy, it will expel sin; it praises Christ; it builds the church; and it goes to heaven.

Unfortunately, the Jews made the Sabbath about the rules. What's wrong with rules? Nothing until the focus is on rules and not the relationship. When we really follow God, our attention is more on the relationship with Him and the lost than on church traditions or religious rules we follow to appear holy. Oops! Is that hypocrisy sneaking in again? Just ask yourself about your church attendance . . . is it a really deep experience with God or are you just going through the motions?

Kyle Idleman in his book, Not a Fan, convicted me of what is the difference between going through the motions and what is a true follower. It's not about what we do, or not do, it's what we do for the Lord. The challenge of this chapter can be said in a few words: Are you a true follower of just a fan of God?

Chapter 59 can be summed up in three words: Sin, Confession and Redemption. The chapter begins with Isaiah challenging the people and accusing them; the people responding with a confession of guilt; and God responding with mercy.

Verses 1,2 challenge the people to think about God. "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear." Scriptures often picture people in trouble lamenting because they feel God is not near. We see it in the Psalms and Habakkuk says in chapter 1:2-4, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you but you do not save?"

But these people were not in trouble because God was not in action or uninvolved in their lives, but their underlying problem was sin that separated them from his presence. The point is that if God's face is hidden, it was because of the dark wall of sin produced by the people. As A. W. Tozer said, "Self is the unique veil that hides us from the face of God."

Verse 3, “Your hands are stained with blood and your fingers with guilt.” This expression does not necessarily refer to physical violence, but to the guilt arising from the oppression and injustice against the poor. If they needed to have their sins spelled out, here they are: they lied easily and regularly, no one called for justice, instead of justice there were empty words, instead of truth there were empty lies, their evil brought forth iniquity much like snakes give birth to evil serpents, they tried to cover their sins with flimsy webs of deceit, their hands and feet and thoughts were given over to sin making crooked paths for themselves that don’t lead to peace.

Paul made reference to this passage in Romans 3:13 to illustrate that both Jew and Gentile are sinful, “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips.” But Paul had the answer, “The righteousness from God comes through Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

In verse 9 the people begin to realize the effects of sin. There is not any justice or righteousness or light. Like blind men they grope and stumble day and night moaning for deliverance. Scripture says, “we growl like bears.” The Hebrew word for growl is an angry word that demonstrates their frustration and helplessness in the face of sin.

Recognizing sin is one thing, but it must be confessed. Verse 12, “For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us and we acknowledge our iniquities: (specifically beginning in vs.13) rebellion and treachery against the Lord, turning our backs on our God, fomenting oppression and revolt, uttering lies our hearts have conceived.” That’s specific admission of guilt, taking responsibility. In my own life I have followed the same pattern of propelling myself headlong into the crooked paths culminating in utter despair. Once I reached my lowest point, I confessed with a contrite heart. My sins did testify against me. Thankfully, like David in Psalm 51 who prayed, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me,” God restored me. We have that promise in 1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

The Lord was displeased as He saw no justice (vs. 13) and was even more troubled that there was not anyone to do anything about it. Remember our last lesson, the shepherds (the leadership) lacked understanding, each was seeking his own gain, they just wanted to drink and be care-free. Does that remind us of our present world situation? Our Lord has called us not to hide our light under the bushel basket, but to spread the light to the world.

No one to help? The Lord would come to their aid. In order for there to be justice (the Hebrew word is Mishpat) there needed to be judgment of sinners and vindication of the godly. Through His own arm He would bring deliverance.

God is characterized as a mighty soldier putting on His armor. His arm was a symbol of power to provide deliverance; His righteousness to undergird every action; and His helmet

represented salvation. Does that remind you of the armor Paul tell us to put on in Ephesians 6 to stand firm against the devil's schemes?

The clothing He put on were garments of vengeance for those wronged; He would accomplish His purposes with passion and zeal. As the verses continue . . . the Lord will repay their enemies. When the enemies come in like a flood, the Lord will lift up a standard that cannot be overcome.

God's glorious promise is that the Redeemer will come to Zion and to those who turn from sin. This is another reference of prophecy for the Messiah. The term Redeemer is translated "goel." This person is known as the Kinsman-Redeemer which had a very special place in the family life of Israel. He was responsible to buy a fellow Israelite out of slavery; he was responsible to buy back family land; and to carry the family name by marrying a childless widow. So the promise of the Messiah was one of deliverance for God's people.

As if that wasn't enough, there was more good news in verse 21. "As for me; this is my covenant with them," says the Lord. "My Spirit, who is on you (Isaiah), and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever," says the Lord.

That's a covenant of faithfulness from God to honor His Word. God does not lie. What He says He will do . . . He will do.

So, what lessons can we draw from these two chapters in Isaiah for ourselves?

- 1) A hypocrite's heart is exposed before God. Admit the sin, confess the sin, receive forgiveness for the sin.
- 2) Fasting is a biblical principle. Abstinence should focus us on God and what He wants for our lives. Do it without fanfare.
- 3) God's rest (the Sabbath) is an important principle for our lives. It is a day to honor God, be grateful for His provisions, and rest our bodies. And . . .
- 4) Remember God has a plan for His world, to right the wrongs and subdue His enemies. It started with the Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Song: Stained Glass Masquerade

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your role as the Kinsman-Redeemer and for Your love for us that will not allow sin to destroy us if we turn to You for guidance and the forgiveness of sins. Help me to observe a proper fast and the make the Sabbath a very special time of rest in You. Amen.