

Review

As we saw in our previous study, the Lord has been speaking to His people for about the last chapter and a half about repentance . He continues as we pick up with chapter 58...

58:1 Declare

The Lord tells Isaiah not to hold back. "Don't be intimidated, don't be politically correct. Just tell it like it is without shame and without fear. Yell it out so people hear you. Tell My people about their sin."

There have been times throughout history that God has found very few men willing to declare sin to His people. Certainly, we live in a time like that today. Nobody gets popular preaching against sin. Just look at the largest church in America. At Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, pastor Joel Osteen doesn't talk about sin. In his book "Your Best Life Now," he says,

"Sadly, of all the people who came out of Egypt, only two men, Joshua and Caleb, ever entered the land God intended for them ... Their lack of faith and their lack of self-esteem robbed them of the fruitful future God had in store for them ... Remember, God had already guaranteed the Hebrews the victory, but because of their poor self-images, they never made it into the Promised Land. They never fulfilled their destiny, all because of the way they saw themselves." (Your Best Life Now, pp. 61-62)

When he appeared on Larry King Live, he said he refuses to call people sinners, and wouldn't say that Jesus was the only way to be saved.

LK: "What if you're Jewish or Muslim, you don't accept Christ at all?"

JO: "You know, I'm very careful about saying who would and wouldn't go to heaven. I don't know..."

LK: "If you believe you have to believe in Christ? They're wrong, aren't they?"

JO: "Well, I don't know if I believe they're wrong. I believe here's what the Bible teaches, and from the Christian faith this is what I be-

lieve. But I just think that only God will judge a person's heart. I spent a lot of time in India with my father. I don't know all about their religion. But I know they love God. And I don't know. I've seen their sincerity..."

It seems like today, God would say just as He did to Ezekiel,

Ezek. 22:30 "I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one."

58:2-4 Fast For A Wicked Fist

What was the sin that Isaiah was called to point out? The sin of religious hypocrisy.

They went through the motions of seeking God. They had established a national "morality." They religiously followed the Law. They liked knowing that Israel was "God's nation." They even went through the practice of fasting, denying themselves food for a day.

But it was all outward actions without inward faith. They had the right words, but the wrong hearts. They were like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, who washed the outside while their insides were corrupt (Matt. 23:25-26).

God points out that even on fasting days, they indulged their pleasures and mistreated their employees. He says,

Is. 58:4 "Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist..."

There seems to be two ways to read this. It's possible that God is saying, "Your foul tempers manifest worse when you fast, and so fasting makes you argue and fight." I know that's been true for me in the past. One of the first fasts I went on after getting married didn't go well at all. About the second or third day into the fast, Judy ordered pizza for the kids. I started arguing, "How can you fill the house with pizza smell when you know I'm fasting?" I was mad all night. Not a very productive fast, I can tell you.

The other possible way to read this is that they were fasting to get God on their side in their ungodly conflicts. They were praying selfishly and wickedly, asking God to bless their treachery and violence.

To Make Your Voice Heard

In verse four, God tells them that if they want their voices to be heard, they better not be fasting the way they are. So, what's the "right" way to fast? God's about to tell them...

58:5-7 The Fast I Choose

God asks the rhetorical question, "Is the way you're fasting the way I would have it?" When the fasting person bows their head and lies down on sackcloth, if they're just going through the motions, it means nothing. God wants the person who is fasting to humble himself, to bow his head before Him, to repent and be broken over his sin.

And that will be evidenced in his behavior towards others. He'll stop oppressing and abusing other people. He'll share food with the hungry. He'll bring the homeless indoors. He'll let his slaves go free.

This list reminds us of the parable which Jesus taught regarding the separation of the sheep and the goats...

Matt. 25:35-36 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'

This is the kind of behavior God expects when a person is fasting with a right heart.

Purpose Of Fasting

But what is the purpose of fasting? What does it accomplish? A quick study of it in the Scriptures shows us that there are several reasons. In the Bible, people fasted to seek and inquire of the Lord (2Sam 12:16); because of extreme sorrow (2Sam 1:12); to appeal to God for answered prayer (Dan. 9:3); or as a simple act of humbling themselves before the Lord (Psa. 35:13). It is also a way to exercise control over the flesh (1Cor. 9:27).

In this case, God was talking about the way to fast to insure that

their prayers will be heard, and that God would answer...

58:8-12 Your Light Will Rise

This is yet another example of where the Bible tells us that it's not about religion, it's about relationship. Fasting is a religious action. But it has no merit or value if done with the wrong relationship. God says that if they fast with the right heart, God will be their guard and deliverer, their prayers will get answered, and they will be strengthened. And the nation will recover and be restored.

58:13-14 Call The Sabbath A Delight

Another thing that the Jews were doing at this time was religiously observing the Sabbath, but also with the wrong heart.

God had given the seventh day of each week as a day of rest for the body and focus of the mind on Him. But the Jews were using the day off to indulge in their own carnal desires. Instead of bringing forth the Word of God, they would talk about their own ideas.

Again, God tells them that if they bring this observance back to the right mindset, He will bless them radically.

I wonder tonight what God would say to each of us about our religious observance. Would He say, "Yes, you're singing songs, but there's no heart of worship"? Would He say, "You're writing tithe checks, but there's no joy in your giving"? Would He say, "You're attending church regularly, but you haven't met with me in a very long time"?

The good news is that God is one who welcomes repentance. He's always ready to forgive and start up the relationship again.