**True Spirituality**

Isaiah 58:1-14

Look at how this chapter starts and ends:

| Isaiah 58:1 | Isaiah 58:14 |
| --- | --- |
| “Cry aloud; do not hold back… declare to my people their transgressions.”  | “Then you shall take delight in the LORD… I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob.” |

The first half is ***a stern rebuke*** of Israel’s sin and hypocrisy. But the second half is filled with ***promises of renewal and restoration***, if they repent. From verse 8 on you hear this word “THEN” over and over. IF we take certain steps, THEN God will bless in specific ways.

Let’s walk through this passage in order - first hearing the confrontation of the prophet, then moving through personal repentance to a fresh commitment to serve the Lord.

**The Problem of Hyprocrisy:**

* Religious exercises are **Worthless** if they conceal a stubborn, sinful heart

“Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness.” Isaiah 58:2

At this point the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were still in the promised land - they still held Jerusalem. ***So they could practice all of the Jewish rituals*** - celebrate the feasts, offer the daily, weekly and monthly sacrifices - observe the different times of fasting and feasting. But increasingly their hearts were not in it - they were just going through the motions of religion. “They seek me daily and delight to know my ways” - in other words, they are coming to the temple courts, they are singing songs, reading Scriptures, appearing to listen to the priests and scribes.

**The Problem of Hyprocrisy:**

* Religious exercises are **Worthless** if they conceal a stubborn, sinful heart

“They ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God.” Isaiah 58:2

They inquired of the Lord, they came to the priests and prophets with questions and concerns; they made a show of “showing up” and did everything according to the written requirements.

**The Problem of Hyprocrisy:**

* Religious exercises are **Worthless** if they conceal a stubborn, sinful heart

“‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?” Isaiah 58:3

The people are even fasting - abstaining from food for a time, sitting in rough clothing, throwing ashes on their head as a sign of their apparent contrition. Look at verse 5:

**The Problem of Hyprocrisy:**

* Religious exercises are **Worthless** if they conceal a stubborn, sinful heart

“A day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?” Isaiah 58:5

The people were gathering for worship. They were singing the songs, they were reciting the verses. They even went above and beyond by fasting, appearing humble and penitent. And they looked the part - they changed their clothes, they sprinkled the ashes.

The problem with all of this religious activity is that **God sees the heart**. The whole point of religious exercises like these is to EXPOSE SIN and lead people to genuine repentance. They were ***going through the motions of repentance without actually repenting***.

Here’s our first point today: religious exercises are WORTHLESS if they conceal a stubborn, sinful heart.

Not all religious exercises are worthless. Fasting, and times of soul searching - personal and corporate times of confession and repentance, national lamentation over sin - can be very powerful and transforming. ***But it has to be from the heart.*** It has to be sincere. The activities themselves have no merit or power.

Of course this makes perfect sense because **what God wants is a RELATIONSHIP**. He doesn’t want mere religious activities. Robots could sing all the right words and machines could light candles, burn incense and sacrifice animals. It’s not about the religious exercises - like prayer, Bible reading, Sunday worship, small groups, giving, serving. It’s about loving God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength. He wants YOU - not just part of you.

Those of you with children or grandkids - imagine if your kids had a checklist that they went through every day:

* Say “good morning.” check
* Smile during breakfast. Check.
* Place breakfast dishes in sink. Check.
* Gather school materials for school. Check.
* Ask about last night sleep on the way to school. Check.
* Share 2 facts about the school day on the way home. Check.
* Perform minimum requirement of homework. Check.
* Make 2 comments during dinner. Check.
* Make eye contact with Mom and smile. Check.
* Provide hug before bed. Check.

***All of those are good activities.*** Nothing wrong with any of them. But if that was the sum total of your relationship you would begin to think you were raising a robot, not a human being, right? You would begin to assume they were hiding something from you.

This is why ***God summed up His desire for His people in one word: LOVE***. What do I want from you? Just love me - with all you are. That’s it. Jesus affirmed that single greatest commandment as well.

Love doesn’t compartmentalize. ***Love never switches off.*** You love your kids, so you are always thinking about them, always praying for them, always looking to encourage and bless them. And, in time, you hope that they come to love you in the same way. You don’t want a little corner of their heart - you want them to simply and truly love you.

But don’t we do this with God? We create **a cozy little spiritual compartment** in our lives and expect God to live in there like a captive genie in our spiritual suitcase. You stay right there, ok - in my little Sunday morning box, my little box for God and the Bible and church. It has to stay right there, all locked up, so it doesn’t spill over into work or family or personal recreation. And we certainly can’t let Jesus try to get over to this secret little sin compartment - that stays locked up nice and tight…

The gospel does not tolerate this. ***God does not accept this any more than we do in our relationships.*** You don’t want a part of your husband or wife. You grow quickly uncomfortable if you sense they are hiding a part of their life from you. Mom radar kicks in right away when a child or teen is acting shifty about their whereabouts last night. You see her on the scent like a bloodhound, asking follow up questions, probing for the truth until the kid breaks and confesses everything.

All of us can fall into **this trap of empty religion** - of spiritual hypocrisy. Dry spells are a part of the Christian journey. But maturity is making those dry spells shorter and shorter. It is being quicker to repent; quicker to see those compartments your sinful heart tries to build - and letting the Holy Spirit knock down those walls to let the light in.

***Isaiah 58 is a sledgehammer for the Holy Spirit.*** It is a wrecking ball that knocks down hypocrisy, stubbornness and superficial religion. If you’ve been just going through the motions for a few weeks or a few months - if you know, deep down, your heart is not in it - you have sealed God up in a little box in the corner of your life. Then invite the wrecking ball. Invite the sledgehammer. Call on the Holy Spirit to show you the truth of your inner self - to help you see what you really love, who you really are.

God sees it all. You’re not fooling him, even if you think you’re fooling the rest of us. That’s part 1 - exposing our false religion, our hypocrisy. Now let’s move to part 2 - discovering the

**The Nature of True Spirituality:**

* True spirituality seeks **Justice**

“Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke…” Isaiah 58:6

In ancient times ***poverty and injustice were very physical things***. Today we have things like loan sharks and credit card debt - and financial poverty has lots of physical effects but you don’t usually see people literally chained to oars in a slave ship or ankles chained to one another in a labor camp. Isaiah is talking about both figurative financial oppression and literal injustice to the poor.

Israelites were explicitly ***forbidden to charge interest*** against one another. God knew that wealthy people would come to take advantage of the poor - and made provisions for His people to avoid these traps of selfishness and greed. For example, if someone got so desperate financially that they had to sell a child or themselves into slavery, the rule in Torah was that you could only hold that slave for seven years. Then you had to release them, unless they chose to stay with you freely because you were such a good master. (That’s a separate gospel illustration that Paul uses for his identity as a bondslave of the Lord - but that’s a message for another time.)

Remember **the book of Ruth** where Naomi and her daughter in law return to Israel and have nothing - no money, no husbands. So Ruth has to find a local field and “glean” at the edges to gather enough to survive from day to day. This was a wonderful provision in God’s law for the poor - that farmers could not harvest their fields to the edges, but had to leave the edges intentionally unharvested so the poor could reap there. And farmers were not allowed to go over their fields a second time with their sickles, but had to leave the scraps for the poor people to come and glean. Boaz went above and beyond with his generosity to Ruth. But the basic provision was supposed to be there for all Jews and foreigners in the land. What a **genius approach** to both provide for the poor and give them the dignity of working for their literal daily bread.

This is the kind of thing that was ***NOT happening in Isaiah’s day***. Provisions for the poor were not available. Slavery was extended indefinitely. The yoke of unpaid or barely paid labor was placed heavily on the poor. The most vulnerable - widows, orphans and foreigners were not being cared for but were being oppressed. True fasting, to the Lord is:

**The Nature of True Spirituality:**

* True spirituality seeks **Justice**

“To let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?” Isaiah 58:6

How relevant is this for us today? We gather on Sundays to sing our songs, study the Scriptures and encourage one another. ***But are we concerned about justice?*** Are we really working for righteousness and peace in our city? Are we concerned for the poor and oppressed? Do our hearts break for the slaves in our city, for the addicts and the homeless and the orphans?

We obviously can’t fix everything - but we can and must be working for justice in some way. God says that is what true spirituality - true fasting - is about. Letting the oppressed go free. Breaking EVERY yoke. ***There are lots of yokes out there.***

Now, we are not a woke church. Our denomination has overtly rejected critical race theory. But we need to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater there. Black Lives Matter was just the latest in a series of cries for help from our minority communities - the message was corrupted by power hungry leaders; I’m not talking about them - that’s a different form of oppression that needs to be resisted. ***I’m talking about the average person of color on the streets of our city.***

Just consider, regardless of the color of your skin - **consider the advantages you were born into**.

* Were you raised by two parents who stayed together?
* Did you grow up without much financial concern?
* Did you receive a reasonably good education?
* Did you have positive friends who helped you go the right direction?
* Did you have additional adults in your life who set a good example and encouraged you - like great teachers, coaches, church leaders?
* Did your parents and others help you go to college?
* Did people help you find work?

Often we assume that we deserve credit for progress we made that really was not about us at all - but was the result of the opportunities connected to our upbringing. Imagine the situation of the average **at risk teenager** in Tampa Bay:

* Raised by one parent or maybe just one grandparent.
* Not the best school environment.
* Very few positive peers; lots of negative peers.
* Very few positive adult role models; lots of negative role models.
* Very few positive work opportunities; lots of negative opportunities to make money.
* Easy to get a girlfriend pregnant; hard not to.
* Easy to get hooked on drugs and alcohol; very hard to escape that addiction.
* If you never learned to read proficiently how could you succeed in school much less go to college?
* Without a high school diploma what work options would be open to you?

Are there bad choices woven into that messy story? Of course. But for the typical foster kid, for the street kid in the city - a lot of their back story is simply the world they grew up in that was no fault of theirs. A heavy yoke was laid on them. ***Who will help break that yoke if not us?***

True spirituality is about justice. It is also about:

**The Nature of True Spirituality:**

* True spirituality shows **Compassion**

“Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house?” Isaiah 58:7

Now, ***fasting is to abstain from eating food*** in order to focus on worship and prayer. But usually we choose to fast not because we don’t have food available but because we choose not to eat the food we have. Some people are forced to fast off and on most every day. Intermittent fasting has become a dieting fad - but for poor people it’s simply a day to day reality.

**Hospitality** in terms of welcoming strangers into your home was a cultural expectation of ancient times. When Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem, it was fully expected that a member of their extended family would take them in for the time. We think of the innkeeper and the fact that there was no room like a traditional tavern - the Prancing Pony in Bree or something (that’s a LOTR reference). But more than likely the “inn” referenced was simply a family member’s extra room - a guest space that had already been filled by another visiting family member.

Our culture is very independent and about personal space. Ancient cultures - especially ***Jewish culture was very interconnected***, especially within your tribe and clan. The whole idea was to take care of each other. If your niece or nephew fell on hard times, you were supposed to take them in. Remember Abraham’s initial heir? He had taken in a ward who had fallen on hard times.

But this again was something the Jews were not doing in Isaiah’s time. They had become selfish and independent like us. They were neglecting the poor, shutting them out.

**The Nature of True Spirituality:**

* True spirituality shows **Compassion**

“When you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh.” Isaiah 58:7

Did you catch the **play on words** here? ***Cover up the naked person, don’t cover up your eyes*** so you don’t see the naked person. What did Jesus say? The one with two cloaks should share with the person who has no cloak. A cloak was not just your coat for chilly nights - it was often the thing you slept in - a combination jacket and sleeping bag. So being without a cloak was to be exposed to the elements without any protection.

Do you see ***the Good Samaritan danger***? We can be so caught up with our religious duties that we are just like the priest and levite who don’t even see the wounded person on the road beside us. We just walk right by hurting people on our way to Bible study, on our way to worship team rehearsal, on our way to youth group… We are busy with good spiritual activities, but are those very activities making us blind to the needs of people right in front of us?

**The Nature of True Spirituality:**

* True spirituality expresses sincere **Devotion**

“Then shall your light break forth like dawn… your righteousness shall go before you.” Isaiah 58:8

***Light here represents truth and authenticity***. Darkness is the condition of falsehood and hypocrisy - when we keep our true desires and thoughts hidden in shadows. When we are honest with ourselves and the Lord, the light of His wonderful mercy shines into our sinful hearts and brings transformation - we’ll get to the results of true spirituality in a minute.

But for now just notice that is what true spirituality IS - sincere, heartfelt devotion. No hypocrisy, no darkness - no hiding from yourself or God or others. Confessing the truth lets the light in so the cleansing can begin - and then God’s light of righteousness can begin to shine from our hearts and lives - then righteousness goes before us. It has to come from the heart. It has to be real. Sabbath rules degenerated quickly and lost the spirit of the Law. God called them back in verse 13:

* True spirituality expresses sincere **Devotion**

“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight… then you shall take delight in the LORD…” Isaiah 58:13-14

The Sabbath became a rigid, strict, lifeless thing - it became a burden, a long list of SHANTs. But it was never intended to be that. **It was always intended to be a GIFT to God’s people**. How many of you lay your head on the pillow each night and get angry and ***resentful at God for making you REST***? How many of you take a Sunday afternoon nap (no need to raise hands) and feel cheated by God for it?

Rest is a wonderfully good gift!

God Himself rested on the seventh day after six days of creation. ***Did God need six days to create the universe?*** Of course not! He could have said, “Let there be everything,” and it all would have appeared in full form. But He was teaching us important principles even in how He created the world. And one of the key lessons was the importance of REST. Work, work, work. But then stop. Rest. Be like God. Rest.

If we ***learn to love the Sabbath - and all of God’s rules*** - then God Himself will become our delight. Then we will develop a sincere devotion to Him. Spiritual exercises don’t have to be worthless and lifeless - they should help connect us to God. But you have to do it the right way - not as a burdensome duty but as the delight of your heart.

That is true spirituality: it seeks justice, it shows compassion it expresses sincere devotion. Now look at the four wonderful results of true spirituality.

**The Results of True Spirituality:**

1. **Righteousness** - your character will be evident

“Then shall your light break forth… your righteousness shall go before you.” Isaiah 58:8

***When love for God leads you to read your Bible***, spend time in prayer, gather regularly for worship, connect with other believers in your small group, reach out to friends and neighbors with the gospel - all of the activities of the normal Christian life - the glory of Jesus shines brightly through you.

You can have all of those same activities but without the light of Jesus if you are just going through the motions. If it’s not from the heart. ***If you have lost your first love***. But when you start to grow in character and calling - the two sides of genuine discipleship - your character will be evident. Your joy in the Lord, your love for Him, will spill out into your everyday life.

This is why **you can often see on someone’s FACE** that they have the joy of the Lord - or not. Abraham Lincoln heard a certain man was coming to see him and he said, ***“Oh, I don’t like that man. I don’t like his face.”*** Someone objected - how can you blame him for his face? The president responded: “Anyone over 40 is responsible for what their face looks like.”

If you scowl long enough, if you embrace the face of that grumpy hobbit in Fellowship of the Ring, eventually your face will stick that way. Your Mom warned you!

But the opposite is also true. Smile lines - ***laugh lines - should be worn like trophies***, like battle scars of wars fought and won.

Christians should be the most joyful people. We have a source of joy that never lets up, of living water that never runs dry. True spirituality should feed that joy - or you’re doing it wrong. Second result:

**The Results of True Spirituality:**

1. **Reconciliation -** your voice will be heard

“Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer, you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’” Isaiah 58:9

Back in **verse 4** God explicitly said through Isaiah, “Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice heard on high.” But when true spirituality fights for justice, loves and serves the poor, hurting and broken and sincerely sings out in worship - then God hears, then God pays attention.

***Are you saying there are things that hinder our prayers?***

You better believe it. Roy Hession, in his classic on revival, **The Calvary Road**, says your life is like a CUP that should be filled up and overflowing with Jesus. If it isn’t it is sin in one of its myriad forms that has become ***a LID on your cup***. Pain and suffering aren’t the lid - your sinful, selfish response to pain and suffering are the lid. One person can suffer and still rejoice while another remains stuck in bitterness. The difference is not the level of pain you are called to endure. The difference is how you respond to that suffering.

Some of us here today ***know there is a lid on our cups*** - and we have to rip those lids off through confession of sin and repentance. We have to admit our selfishness, confess our sins - bring everything out of the darkness and into the light of God’s love and mercy where there can be healing and restoration. And that is the third promised result:

**The Results of True Spirituality:**

1. **Renewal** - God will bless and lead you

“Then shall your light break forth… and your healing shall spring up speedily.” Isaiah 58:8

***God isn’t always promising quick physical healing*** - anyone who tells you different is selling something. “Life is pain, princess.” But God is promising the deep internal, spiritual healing that you most desperately need. And that is available in Christ RIGHT THIS VERY INSTANT. That’s what Roy Hession means by revival - a fresh experience of the grace and love of Jesus.

You can have that right now just for the asking. The light of God’s grace will shine upon you, His healing mercies will illumine your heart and soul. **1 John 1:9** should be engraved in your mind: “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

IF. If we confess our sins. If we don’t - there is no promise of forgiveness and cleansing and restoration. The healing of Jesus’ love and mercy depends on that IF of confession. Hession says ***“the water of God’s grace ONLY FLOWS to the LOWEST PLACE.”*** If you are dry it is because you have placed yourself on high ground - you have exalted yourself - you have elevated yourself above God and He cannot bless you up there. You have to get down in the mud. You have to confess the depths of your sin. And look at what God promises if you do:

**The Results of True Spirituality:**

1. **Renewal** - God will bless and lead you

“Then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.” Isaiah 58:10

Do you feel **the If/ then of Isaiah 58**? Justice. Compassion. Devotion. That’s the if. Those things only come from real confession and repentance with commitment to live differently and live entirely for the Lord. But THEN - the light comes. The joy comes. The purpose and power come.

**The Results of True Spirituality:**

1. **Renewal** - God will bless and lead you

“And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places…” Isaiah 58:10

Do you want the desert or the garden? Do you want to remain dry and parched or are you ready for those springs of living water?

**The Results of True Spirituality:**

1. **Renewal** - God will bless and lead you

“And you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.” Isaiah 58:10

Oh, how we need this renewal in the Lord - how we need times of refreshing to come from Him.

**The Results of True Spirituality:**

1. **Rejoicing** - deep delight in the Lord

“Then you shall take delight in the LORD… I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob…” Isaiah 58:14

This is the living water Jesus talked about. This is the bread of life He promised in Himself. ***We have to learn to FEAST on the Lord Jesus.*** But that means turning away from our feasting on the things of this world. We have grown very fat and self indulgent - and very self satisfied and justified in our complacency. We snack on Jesus - we sip here and there. But Jesus offers us limitless, endless water - welling up from inside us through His Spirit. Jesus offers us soul satisfying bread as we do the will of the Father.

Let’s take a few minutes to really examine our hearts - to invite God to speak to us and challenge us - to bring us to our knees so we can really confess and really repent - so we can turn from our false spirituality and embrace true devotion to Jesus.