

Isaiah 58 False Religion and the Hypocrite

At first reading of this text, the topic is fasting and keeping the Sabbath. But, as we delve deeper, we see this text is aimed at exposing the heart and the works of false religion and those who take part in false religion. I think it is safe to label this type of person as a hypocrite. With this in mind, I hope this text will reveal great truths about the ways of a hypocrite. It will also be a test for our own hearts, a warning to us as well. Notice v. 1: **“Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.”** We need this text! I pray the Word of God will effectively work today! I have 3 truths concerning false religion and the hypocrite, as well as a number of applications throughout. Let’s begin!

1. A hypocrite has the appearance of religious works. A hypocrite appears to be something he is not. The motive is appearance. Look at v. 2: **“Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God.”** As we will see, they also fast and keep the Sabbath, doing EXACTLY what God prescribed. These are the works of religious people. This is not hard to see. Think about it. What if you *“seek God daily,” “delight to know his ways,” “desire justice,” “delight to draw near to God,” “fast,” “come to church and worship with God’s people on a regular basis?”* If these things are true (OUTWARDLY), will anyone deny you are a Christian? Our culture is FULL of these kinds of people! And I, with your elders, would be naïve to think that some of us do not also fall into this description! So what is the problem? Because, in our text, God still finds fault with Israel!

Let me ask again, “What is the problem?” Eventually, we will see the problem is the heart. Jesus says, **“it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person”** (Matt. 15:11), . . . **“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.”** Many of Isaiah’s readers did not get this simple truth. And many in our culture miss it as well! May it not be so here!

As we continue through this passage, we see the heart come out in motive and actions, particularly the religious work of fasting. Look at v. 3. They think their fasting is worthy of a pat on the back by God. They say, **“Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?”** And God says, **“Behold, in the day of your fast, you seek your own pleasure, and oppress your workers.”** And v. 4: **“Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist . . . Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.”** On the surface they were doing the RIGHT things. But out of their heart came evil. The way they treated their “neighbor” was the exact opposite of God’s desire for a person who loves God from the heart. They were hypocrites. They were white-washed tombs. The outside of the cup was clean.

What might this look like in a Baptist Church in Rowan County? You have a church full of people who come regularly, a church full of people who give of their time and resources regularly, a church where solemn prayers are offered to God, a church where good “reformed” theology is taught and spoken about on a regular basis. It is a church that may read good books. But, under the surface, at home, Fathers are not kind to their children, they do not lead their

family in the ways of God. They do not love their wives as Christ loves the church. Mothers also, do not teach their children, nor do they respect their husbands. Children are disobedient and parents do not want to do what is often difficult to raise their children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. On Monday mornings, bosses are “harsh” with their employees. Family members are self-indulgent in different areas of their lives. Pastors wastes time on things that don’t matter. Deacons serve out of compulsion. It is a church where the community looks at it and says, “*look at all those things they do, they really got it going on over there.*” But as Isaiah has already said **“This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men . . .”** For such a church I think of the Church at Sardis from Rev. 3:1-3: Jesus says, **“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent . . .”** May we not merely appear as righteous! Such are the hypocrites of this world! Therefore, I pray God will show each of us individually, as well as us a church how we may be sinning in these ways! And at the end of the day, Let your motive be to delight in God! Let’s move on.

2. A hypocrite seeks his own good. Now, there is a way we can seek our own good without being sinful. For example, since God has given us these bodies, we may seek to keep them healthy by eating right or working out. Or we may try to study hard and improve our minds and pursue pleasures that are healthy. This is why Paul can say for husbands to treat their wives as they would their own bodies (Eph. 5:28). But this is not what we are talking about here in regard to hypocrites. A hypocrite is selfish in a sinful way. Instead of seeking God and HIS ways, this person is idolatrous, seeking his/her own good above all other things. Look at v. 3: Again with fasting, Isaiah says, **“Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure . . .”** They wanted people to see them. They did want God to hear their voice, but for selfish reasons (v. 4b).

The same kind of selfishness in the lives of the religious was going on at Jesus time just as strong. These words and truths from Isaiah are taught by Jesus in Matt. 6:1-6 when he says, **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”**

Brothers and sisters, the motive of our hearts for all religious works are not self, but instead directed at others. What is the 2nd greatest commandment? “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Now, notice the focus of fasting in vv. 6-7: **“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from**

your own flesh?” Let me ask, “*Is there anything selfish about such a fast?*” No! One of the purposes of fasting (and other religious works) is to seek the good of our neighbor.

Let me simply mention these verses with and add some comments. (the following applications are from J. Piper, *Hunger for God*, chapter on fasting and Isaiah 58).

i) God prescribes that we set people free. V. 6: “**to loose the bonds of wickedness and to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.**” We must live to set people free and not burden them. Jesus said to the religious lawyers, “**Woe to you lawyers, for you weigh men down with burdens hard to bare while you yourselves will not touch the burdens with one of your fingers**” (Luke 11:46). YES, we teach people to obey the commands of Christ, but first we teach them to come to Christ. This is the gospel. Jesus says, “**Come to me all of you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. For my burden is easy, and My load is light**” (Matt. 11:28-30). (

ii. God prescribes that we feed the hungry. V. 7: “**to share your bread with the hungry.**”

iii. God prescribes that we bring the homeless poor into the house. V. 7: “**and bring the homeless poor into your house.**”

iv. God prescribes that we clothe the naked. V. 7: “**when you see the naked, you cover him.**”

v. God prescribes that we put away gestures and words that show contempt for other people. V. 9: Remove the “**pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness.**”

vi. God prescribes that we not only give our food, but give ourselves. V. 10: “**if you pour yourself out for the hungry . . .**” This means relationships are what is important as we give ourselves to the poor and needy for the sake of the gospel.

3. A hypocrite is deceived. Throughout the passage some very religious people are thinking: “I’m fasting,” or “I’m keeping the Sabbath.” However, they were blind; they were deceived. Look at v. 2 again: “**they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God.**” It seems clear to me that Israel as a nation in Isaiah’s time was deceived so completely that they actually thought they were worshipping God rightly! They want God to intervene for them. They want to come to worship. They talk the language of “nearness to God.” They may even have moving experiences in their efforts to draw near to God. But, they are deceived! Something is wrong!

Brothers and sisters, those who are the most religious in this world are those to be most likely deceived. And we must not be so full of pride, or so naïve, to think we are immune to such deception. Satan is the great deceiver. He disguises himself as an angel of light. This must be a warning to us, which is good; for this WORD is a means to our sanctification as it “**teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains us for righteousness**” (2 Tim. 3:16). Oh, how we must ponder these things! Hypocrisy is real! It ruins the worship of God. Jesus says, “**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the**

weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Matt. 23:23-24)

You might ask, “*How do I know if I am a hypocrite?*” Or, as a church, “*How do we know if we are hypocrites?*” There are many tests. Am I humble? Do I love God in my heart? Do I truly desire the good of my neighbor? Are the results of my heart, over a period of time, sinful? Listen to this quote from John Piper: “*No worship—no preaching, no singing, no praying, no fasting, however intense or beautiful—that leaves us harsh with our workers on Monday, or contentious with our spouses at home, or self-indulgent in other areas of our lives, or angry enough to hit somebody, is true, God-pleasing worship.*” We must search our hearts! And if our religious works leaves sin in our lives untouched, maybe we are hypocrites (see v. 5).

Now, in closing I want to mention something about rewards and blessings. We’ve already seen from Matt. 5 that the hypocrite’s reward is the praise of men, not God. Jesus says when you give, don’t do it so that others know. When you pray, go into your closet where no one sees but God. We see the same in Is. 58 with fasting. The one who fasts must be humble and not draw attention to himself. Ultimately, God is our reward. Heaven is our reward. However, this passage does speak of blessings for those who do religious works in the right way, namely with a motive of love for God. Here they are:

i. The darkness in your life will become light. V. 8: “**Then shall your light break forth like the dawn.**” Also v. 10: “**then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.**” It is interesting that “*there is more light in the dark places of the world for those who go there to serve. And there is more darkness in the glitz of the great malls for those who go there to escape.*” Brothers and sisters, obedience to God, especially as we serve others, leads to blessings, not gloom. The more self-focused both as individuals and as a church we become, the more sad we become.

ii. We see the promise of physical strength. V. 8: “**and your healing shall spring up speedily . . .**” And v. 11: He will “**make your bones strong.**” You may say, “*I’m too busy to serve.*” And, “*I’m so tired all the time.*” Well, from what I see here, maybe serving others is just what you need. (Maybe speak to meals.)

iii. God will be behind us and in front of us with righteousness and glory. V. 8: “**your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.**”

iv. God promises to guide us continually. V. 11: “**And the Lord will guide you continually.**” It seems that God gives his most intimate guidance to those who give up themselves for the needs of others.

v. God will satisfy the soul. V. 11: He will “**satisfy your desire in scorched places.**”

vi. God will make you a watered garden with springs that do not fail. V. 11: “**and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.**” This is a paradox. But, when we empty ourselves for others, we actually become full.

vii. If we give ourselves (to the poor), God will restore the ruins of his city—and his people. V. 12: **“And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”** In their context, Isaiah was speaking of their return to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. In our context, I think generally speaking, right works from a heart of love for God results in restoration. And, for us, as we look back upon the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, ALL restoration is found in union with Him. Jesus told the woman at the well, **“If you drink the water I will give you, you will never thirst again,”** and **“it will become a never ending spring of water inside you”** (John 4).

Brothers and sisters, Beware of hypocrisy. Examine yourself. Look at your heart. Look at your works. Do they have the appearance of what is real, but no substance? Think about your motive. Are the things you do really for yourself? If so, maybe you are deceived. Do not be deceived!